

Japan to Release Controls on Imported Beef

TOKYO, Jan. 22 (Kyodo) — The Japanese government plans to ease controls on beef imports that were imposed to counter mad cow disease, possibly in early February, by allowing meat from cattle aged up to 30 months to be imported, rather than the current 20 months, sources close to the matter said Monday.

The plan comes after the Cabinet Office's Food Safety Commission reported last year that there would be no significant impact on human health from such a relaxation.

Raising the upper age limit to 30 months is expected to allow over 90 percent of U.S.-produced beef to meet the new criteria.

According to the Health, Labor and Welfare Ministry, beef meeting the relaxed criteria is expected to start arriving in Japan around late February to early March.

Japan banned imports of U.S. and Canadian beef in 2003 following an outbreak of mad cow disease, formally known as bovine spongiform encephalopathy, or BSE. While it lifted the blanket ban in December 2005, it has imposed conditions, including the 20-month-or-younger age limit.

Upon consultation by the ministry, the safety commission said in October that the impact on human health of such a relaxation would be "negligible."

Based on the commission's report, the Japanese government held discussions with the United States, Canada, France and the Netherlands on related matters such as their management systems for cattle age.

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