EU Looks to Ban U.S. from Using European Cheese Names

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A package of Kraft parmesan cheese is seen in Washington, Tuesday, March 11, 2014. Looking for American-made parmesan cheese on the grocery aisle? If the European Union gets its way, you may not be able to find it. Also missing could be domestic asiago, feta and gorgonzola. The cheeses would still be there, but their names might be different. As part of free trade talks, the European Union is expected to propose to ban the United States from using certain European cheese names if the cheese is made here. **(AP Photo/J. David Ake)**

WASHINGTON (AP) — Errico Auricchio produced cheese with his family in Italy until he brought his trade to the United States more than 30 years ago. Now, the European Union is saying his cheese isn't authentic enough to carry a European name.

As part of trade talks, the EU wants to ban the use of names like Parmesan, feta and Gorgonzola on cheese made in the United States. The argument is that the American-made cheeses are shadows of the original European varieties and cut into sales and identity of the European cheeses.

Auricchio, president of Wisconsin-based BelGioioso Cheese Inc., says he has no idea what he would call his Parmesan if he had to find a new name.

"I Can't Believe It's Not Parmesan," he jokes.

The Europeans say Parmesan should only come from Parma, Italy, not from Auricchio's plant or those familiar green cylinders that American companies sell. Feta should only be from Greece, they say, even though feta isn't a place. The EU argues it "is so closely connected to Greece as to be identified as an inherently

Greek product."

So, a little "hard-grated cheese" for your pasta? It doesn't have quite the same ring as Parmesan.

U.S. dairy producers, cheesemakers and food companies are all fighting the idea, which they say would hurt the $4 billion domestic cheese industry and endlessly confuse consumers.

"It's really stunning that the Europeans are trying to claw back products made popular in other countries," says Jim Mulhern, president of the National Milk Producers Federation, which represents U.S. dairy farmers.

The European Union would not say exactly what it is proposing or even whether it will be discussed this week as a new round of talks on an EU-United States free trade agreement opens in Brussels.

European Commission spokesman Roger Waite would only say that the question "is an important issue for the EU."

That's clear from recent agreements with Canada and Central America, where certain cheese names were restricted unless the cheese came from Europe. Under the Canadian agreement, for example, new feta products manufactured in Canada can only be marketed as feta-like or feta-style, and they can't use Greek letters or other symbols that evoke Greece.

Though it has not laid out a public proposal, the EU is expected to make similar attempts to restrict marketing of U.S.-made cheeses, possibly including Parmesan, Asiago, Gorgonzola, feta, fontina, grana, Muenster, Neufchatel and Romano.

And it may not be just cheese. Other products with traditional ties to European countries that could be affected include bologna, Black Forest ham, Greek yogurt, Valencia oranges and prosciutto, among other foods.

The trade negotiations are important for the EU as Europe has tried to protect its share of agricultural exports and pull itself out of recession. The ability to exclusively sell some of the continent's most famous and traditional products would prevent others from cutting into those markets.

Concerned about the possible impact of changing the labels on those popular foods, a bipartisan group of 55 senators wrote U.S. Trade Representative Michael Froman and Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack this week asking them not to agree to any such proposals by the EU.

Led by New York Sen. Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y., and Pennsylvania Sen. Patrick Toomey, R-Pa., the members wrote that in the states they represent, "many small- or medium-sized, family-owned businesses could have their businesses unfairly restricted" and that export businesses could be gravely hurt.

Schumer said artisanal cheese production is a growing industry across New York.

"Muenster is Muenster, no matter how you slice it," he says.

Trevor Kinkaid, a spokesman for the U.S. trade representative, said that conversations on the issue are in the early stages but that the U.S. and E.U. have "different points of view" on the topic.

The agency wouldn't disclose details of the negotiations, but Kinkaid said the U.S. government is "committed to increasing opportunity for U.S. businesses, farmers and workers through trade."

Large food companies that mass produce the cheeses are also fighting the idea. Kraft, closely identified with its grated Parmesan cheese, says the cheese names have long been considered generic in the United States.

"Such restrictions could not only be costly to food makers, but also potentially confusing for consumers if the labels of their favorite products using these generic names were required to change," says Kraft spokesman Basil Maglaris.

Jaime Castaneda works for the U.S. Dairy Export Council and is the director of a group formed to fight the EU changes, the Consortium for Common Food Names. He says the idea that great cheese can only come from Europe "is just not the case anymore."

He points out that artisanal and locally produced foods are more popular than ever here and says some consumers may actually prefer the American brands. European producers can still lay claim to more place-specific names, like Parmigiano-Reggiano, he says.

"This is about rural America and jobs," he says.

Auricchio and other producers say they are angry because it was Europeans who originally brought the cheeses here, and the American companies have made them more popular and profitable in a huge market.

"We have invested years and years making these cheeses," Auricchio says. "You cannot stop the spreading of culture, especially in the global economy."

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