

DOH's outreach effort on beef imports fuels protests

Written by Taipei Times

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The Department of Health (DOH) decision to try a new tool — Plurk, a micro-blogging service similar to Twitter — to promote public understanding of the new policy on US beef imports has turned out to be as controversial as the beef policy itself.

The department announced on Oct. 23 that Taiwan would expand market access for US beef, after officials of the two countries agreed on a protocol the day before in Washington, to lift a partial ban on US beef imports. Under the terms of the new protocol, US bone-in beef, ground beef, intestines, brains, spinal cords and processed beef from cattle younger than 30 months and which have not been contaminated with specific risk materials (SRMs), will be allowed to enter Taiwan starting on Nov. 10.

Only imports of US boneless beef from cattle younger than 30 months, which contain no SRMs, are allowed at present.

The government's decision to relax curbs on US in-bone beef and cow organs sparked a massive public outcry because of concern about bovine spongiform encephalopathy, also known as mad cow disease.

The department's use of Plurk, however, has also triggered online protests.

After a series of posts were deleted by the department, Plurk users accused the health agency of running a con game or cover-up. They said the department has been busy deleting their suggestions, instead of recording them.

They also accused the department of failing to provide the public with a Chinese-language version of the protocol signed with the US "because it was afraid of attracting even more controversy."

In response to the DOH's explanation that it was concerned a translated version would raise issues about the quality of the translation, a Plurk user named Chaotic said: "Usually when a two countries sign a protocol, copies are made in both languages. How come there is no Chinese contract?"

"If [the protocol] doesn't have a Chinese version, how will all those people who can't read English understand what we just signed?" said jerry0881, another Plurk user. "We can't accept the Department of Health's explanation."

As for claims that users' suggestions were being deleted, the department said it was deleting suggestions after it recorded them.

Meanwhile, the Consumers' Foundation launched a signature drive yesterday to back calls for a referendum to require the government to renegotiate a protocol with the US on US beef and

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beef-product imports.

The foundation hopes to garner 90,000 signatures in 14 days in opposition to the lifting of a ban on imports of US bone-in beef products at “the expense of the people’s health and the environment,” foundation chairman Hsieh Tien-jen (許添進) told a press conference.

The government was defying the public’s will in refusing to reopen talks with the US, Hsieh said.

“Who’s the boss? It’s confusing,” he said. “The government doesn’t seem to act like a government. That’s a terrible thing.”

The Referendum Law (公投法) stipulates that the signatures of 0.5 percent of eligible voters — approximately 80,000 people — must be collected to petition to hold a referendum. In the second application stage, 5 percent of eligible voters — approximately 800,000 — must sign the petition before the proposed referendum can be screened by the Cabinet’s Referendum Review Committee.

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