

Proposed beef referendum clears committee review

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A civic movement to hold a referendum on US beef imports cleared another hurdle yesterday, passing a review by the Cabinet's Referendum Screening Committee by a vote of 16-0.

After a meeting that lasted a little over an hour, committee chairman Chao Yung-mau (趙容茂) announced that the petition launched by the Consumers' Foundation met the criteria in the Referendum Act (公職人員選舉罷免法), and "we have therefore decided to approve [it]."

The proposed referendum would ask voters if they agree that the government should retract its decision to lift the ban on imports of US beef organs and bone-in and ground beef, and that the government should renegotiate the deal with the US.

The Central Election Commission is next expected to have household registration authorities check that the more than 129,000 people who signed the petition were eligible voters and that no signatures were duplicated.

Proposals must pass a two-phase review process. In the first phase, the applicant must collect the signatures of 0.5 percent of the number of people who were eligible to vote in the last presidential election — around 86,000 in this case — and pass an initial review by the referendum committee.

In the second phase, the petition must be endorsed by 5 percent of those eligible to vote in the last presidential poll — around 860,000 people — and pass a second review.

Consumers' Foundation chairman Hsieh Tien-jen (謝天建) yesterday welcomed the committee's decision.

"Although only 860,000 signatures are required to pass the second review, we will aim for at least 1 million signatures just to be safe," Hsieh said.

Taipei and Washington signed a protocol on Oct. 22 under which Taiwan agreed to lift its ban on US bone-in beef and other products, sparking a public outcry.

Civic groups led by the Consumers' Foundation say the protocol could endanger the health of local consumers.

Under public pressure, the legislature amended the Act Governing Food Sanitation (食品安全法) on Tuesday to target beef products from countries with documented cases of bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE, or mad cow disease) over the past decade.

The amendment effectively bans US ground beef, beef offal and other cow parts, such as the skull, eyes and intestines, but sets no restrictions on bone-in beef.

Following the legislature's move, Premier Wu Den-yih (吳登毅) said the government would consult Washington on matters related to beef imports as part of the protocol had been

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overridden.

Hsieh yesterday said using a referendum to pressure the US into reopening negotiations was the best way to proceed.

He said the fact that bone-in beef is less dangerous than ground beef and beef offal in terms of BSE contamination does not mean no risk is involved.

Consumers should be allowed to decide for themselves whether to allow imports, he said.

KMT caucus whip Lu Hsueh-chang (呂秀蓮) yesterday called on the civic groups to rethink their proposal as the legislature had already dealt with the matter.

The Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) yesterday welcomed the committee's decision, but said there was a long road ahead before a referendum would be held.

DPP Legislator Ker Chien-ming (柯建銘) said the referendum must be held in conjunction with major elections or risk falling short of the voter threshold needed in order for the results to be valid.

Executive Yuan Spokesman Su Jun-pin (蘇俊平) yesterday said the Cabinet respected the committee's decision.

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