

## Waiting for the Sizzle

Beef eaters are hoping that the Taiwan government's risk assessment process will soon conclude that U.S. imports can now resume.

For nearly a year, beef lovers in Taiwan have had to do without their favorite cuts of U.S. prime ribs and steak. The day before Christmas in 2003, the Taiwan government banned the import of U.S. beef and related products, following confirmation that a single cow in the state of Washington was found to be infected with Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy (BSE), more commonly known as "mad cow disease." (It was later determined that the cow in question originated in Canada, where the initial infection likely occurred.)

In March 2004, at about the time that inventories in Taiwan began to be depleted, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) provided the Taiwan authorities with the results of its comprehensive epidemiological investigation, a description of additional measures taken by the U.S. government to safeguard human and animal health, and documentation regarding the handling of the December BSE case. Based on that documentation and information, USDA requested that Taiwan lift the ban on imports of U.S. beef.

The Taiwan agency responsible for determining whether the resumption of imports would pose a risk for consumers is the Department of Health, which assigned the task to a 17-member BSE Risk Assessment Committee. Since last March, the Committee has held numerous meetings with USDA representatives, and in November it sent a team on a verification trip to the United States. The Committee's final report is scheduled to be presented to the Department of Health this month.

If the market is re-opened, it would revive a business that in 2003 came to US\$76.3 million worth of beef sold to Taiwan, the sixth largest export market for the U.S. in that category. Although shipments from New Zealand have grown since the ban on U.S. beef went into effect, Taiwan's overall beef imports have declined, and many restaurant and supermarket operators have reported business losses.

The risk-assessment process required to lift the prohibition is considered highly technical and based on scientific principles. U.S. sources note that while the USDA wishes that the process would move more rapidly, it believes that the Department of Health has managed the assessment in a competent and credible manner.

Once the market re-opening occurs, U.S. beef exporters are prepared to resume shipments almost immediately. The U.S. Meat Export Federation and its member companies will launch a promotional campaign to quickly regain market share. They stress that lifting the ban will benefit not only the American and Taiwanese companies involved in trading, processing, and selling beef, but also Taiwanese consumers by providing them with more high-quality beef at reasonable prices.