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USDA cites confusion on beef export rules

WASHINGTON (AP) — A New York plant shipped prohibited veal to Japan because workers and government inspectors didn't understand the rules governing such exports, the Bush administration said Friday.

"This was not a situation where somebody was trying to hide something," said Agriculture Secretary Mike Johanns, releasing the results of two separate investigations. "Quite the opposite happened. It very clearly indicates they were just not connecting as to what could be shipped into the Japanese market," he added.

Japan suspended imports on Jan. 20 because the veal cuts contained backbone, which Asian countries consider at risk for mad cow disease. The cut of veal, hotel rack, is eaten in the United States.

Japan banned American beef after the United States confirmed its first case of mad cow disease in December 2003, and had only recently reopened its market.

The shipment from Brooklyn-based Atlantic Veal & Lamb violated trade rules with Japan, Johanns said, but, "the veal posed absolutely no risk to human health; there was no danger there."

Johanns blamed the mistakes on the newness of the export rules. The plant and its supplier, Ohio-based Golden Veal Corp., were certified to ship to Japan on Jan. 6 and were the first two companies allowed to send veal to Japan.

A Japanese customer had ordered specific veal products from Atlantic on Dec. 27, Johanns said.

Millions of dollars in exports hang in the balance while officials struggle to repair the damage.

Of the \$3.9 billion in global sales of American beef in 2003, Japan, once the biggest U.S. customer of the meat, accounted for \$1.4 billion of beef and meat products.

The reports also contained measures to prevent recurrence the problem that led Tokyo to suspend imports of U.S. beef products for a second time, the Kyodo News agency reported in Tokyo.

These investigative findings by the United States revealed a second violation of export rules. The shipment also contained offal, or inedible trimmings, that was produced by the Golden plant, which was not authorized to ship offal. Furthermore, at least some of the offal came from calves

that were slaughtered before the plant was eligible to make any shipments to Japan.

The Agriculture Department has taken several steps to fix the problem. For example, plants will no longer get blanket certification to ship to Japan; they will be granted permission to ship specific cuts and products, officials said.

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