PERSPECTIVE

Meat Processing Global editor Chris Harris looks at the possibility that the Japanese market will reopen to U.S. beef.

It looks as though the long battle for the United States to get its beef back into the Japanese market could finally be reaching the end. The forecasts are that following some heavy pressure in recent days and weeks, the ban could be lifted as early as next week.

This would then open up the Japanese market to boneless beef from cattle under the age of 20 months. However, while the move is welcome, it raises several questions. Firstly, the U.S. having been out of the Japanese market is going to have a fight on its hands to recapture old markets. While they have been away, others have made hay. Australia in particular has taken up the gauntlet and filled a need that the absences of U.S. beef had left. Australia will not give up these new customers easily.

The U.S. has also got a battle on its hands to rebuild consumer confidence in Japan. A Kyodo News survey showed that three-quarters of those questioned did not trust U.S. beef. There is a big marketing battle ahead. As the UK has found, being allowed to export beef again and actually getting it into the market to any substantial degree are two entirely different things.

Thirdly, has the U.S. sufficient supplies of the right type of beef - boneless beef from cattle under 20 months of age. Being able to source the beef that can be proven to be under 20 months of age and certified as such could prove a problem for the U.S.

From the Japanese viewpoint, the demand for cattle under 20 months of age is taking things to excess. It is generally accepted that the risk of BSE is from cattle over the age of 30 months and that signs of the disease are unlikely if not impossible to discern in such young cattle. However, the sourcing of these young cattle to a required conformation and quality is still going to be the main problem.

If the U.S. does manage to start exporting in any quantity to Japan in the New Year, then there could be another obstacle that the exporters will face. Perhaps not immediately, but possibly from March exports could rise to such a degree that the higher tariffs could be triggered and exporters would face charges of 50 percent rather than 38.5 percent. This is already a problem that is taxing the Australian beef industry.

Finally, the U.S. has always argued for science to be the main criteria for allowing its beef back onto the market. Why then does it still have a block on UK beef and beef products, when they have been declared safe worldwide? It appears that the U.S. wants to have its cake and eat it, too. It wants the world to regard its beef as safe, but refuses to accept the scientific proof that the risk from UK beef products is equally minimal - or are politics at play here?

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