

North American Beef Imports to Be Resumed

– More Information Disclosure to Consumers Required –

US and Canadian beef will come back to the Japanese dining table after a two-year hiatus. The Prions Expert Committee of the Cabinet Office's Food Safety Commission, which had addressed bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE) risk assessment involving North American beef in comparison with domestic beef, reached the conclusion that US and Canadian beef and beef offal pose at very low risk if import conditions are strictly observed. In accordance with this conclusion, the Japanese government is to lift the ban on North American beef imports.

Dissatisfied with Japan's prolonged ban on US beef, American lawmakers had discussed imposing sanctions on Japan. The beef trade dispute had threatened to turn into a fresh source of trade friction. Although there remain some uncertainties, notably Japanese consumers' reaction to North American beef after the resumption of imports, the Prions Expert Committee's assessment is most likely to settle the bilateral beef trade row.

The Food Safety Commission set two conditions for a resumption of North American beef imports – the cattle must be aged under 20 months,

and risky substances that could transmit BSE, such as the brain and spinal cord, must be removed. However, no specific measures have been worked out to ensure the compliance of the conditions to verify their implementation, and some consumer groups are concerned about the resumption of North American beef imports. Consumers are becoming much more sensitive about food safety. The Japanese government, food service providers and North American beef producers are required to thoroughly disclose information and secure the confidence of Japanese consumers.