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EU Envoys Coming to Discuss Vegetable Ban

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A European Commission delegation, headed by health and consumer policy commissioner John Dalli, will visit Moscow in the coming days to negotiate the lifting of Russia's ban on EU vegetables, spokesman for the European Union delegation to Moscow Denis Daniilidis said.

European Commission President Jose Manuel Barroso sent a letter to President Dmitry Medvedev on Monday expressing surprise that the issue has not yet been resolved following European Union measures dealing with the E. coli epidemic, Daniilidis said.

Medvedev announced at a meeting with EU officials in Nizhny Novgorod earlier this month that vegetable imports could resume if the European Union provides certificates guaranteeing the health safety of the shipments.

The conflict comes from how each side defines a proper guarantee.

The European Union proposed a sample document last week that certified the origin of the shipment and confirmed that that region is E. coli-free.

But the Federal Consumer Protection Service rejected the offer three days later as not sufficient, demanding that every shipment be tested for the bacteria, Daniilidis said.

The Federal Consumer Protection Service declined to comment for this story.

The certifications that Russia demands hamper the European producers' position on the market because of the high cost and the administrative hurdles such testing would involve, Daniilidis said.

"It is not fair to us," Daniilidis said.

It is not clear how much money the European Union has lost since the ban went into effect June 2, but about a quarter of the total EU vegetable harvest is shipped to Russia. European vegetables worth $854 million were sold domestically last year.

The E. coli epidemic infected several thousand people and killed at least 39 in Europe. The ban incited loud protests from the European Union.

Russia is the only country to maintain the ban on EU vegetables. The source of bacteria has been traced to bean sprouts in north Germany.

Illegal imports of European vegetables are a possibility, said Gennady Onishchenko, head of the Federal Consumer Protection Service, RBK Daily reported.

Some outdoor markets, small stores and kiosks have been selling European vegetables masquerading as non-European, Vedomosti reported.

Embargoes of foreign foodstuffs are not unusual. Recently, Russia limited a large portion of meat exports from Brazil, and last year poultry imports from the United States were stopped because of safety concerns.

The vegetable ban conflict is an international public relations stunt, said UralSib bank consumer market analyst Tigran Hovhannisyan.

"Russia has to show it protects its citizens before the elections; Europe has to show it cares about its business interests," he said.

Hovhannisyan said he predicts the issue will be resolved and exports will resume in about a month.

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