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INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Produce From EU to Flow if Certified

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Russia agreed to lift a ban on vegetable imports from the European Union after the EU promised to certify that the produce isn't contaminated, the European Commission said.

"The EU and Russia signed this morning in Moscow an agreement that will allow exports of EU vegetables to resume immediately," the commission said Wednesday in a statement.

Lyubov Voropayeva, a spokeswoman for Russia's public health agency, said she's not aware of an agreement on lifting the ban. "The negotiations haven't concluded yet," she said after the commission's announcement.

Russia suspended imports of German and Spanish tomatoes, lettuce and cucumbers on May 30, then extended the ban to all fresh vegetables from the EU on June 2. President Dmitry Medvedev vowed on June 10 to allow a resumption of imports as soon as a certification system was put in place.

EU member states that export fresh vegetables to Russia will have "for a limited period of time to certify the origin of the produce and the absence of E. coli 104 — the strain responsible for the outbreak in Germany," the commission said.

The outbreak that has killed dozens in Europe was traced to contaminated bean sprouts and shoots from an organic farm in Lower Saxony.

The certification system will be applied until the 10th day after the last reported case linked to E. coli 104 by EU member state authorities, the commission said.

"It [the deal] does not mean that everything will immediately return to the Russian market," said Gennady Onishchenko, head of Russia's state consumer protection watchdog.

Russia's "completely unacceptable" import ban on European vegetables has complicated efforts to finish talks on Moscow's bid to join the World Trade Organization, the top European trade official said Tuesday.

"The environment is not so very propitious to make much progress in the coming days at least because we are still facing a total import ban for European vegetables," EU Trade Commissioner Karel De Gucht said in a speech at the U.S. Chamber of Commerce in Washington. "It is not a small thing. What the Russians are doing is completely unacceptable, and we do not accept this. I hope that in the coming days this will be resolved," he said.

The EU, which exported about 600 million euros ($862 million) of vegetables to Russia last year, had previously protested that such a broad ban was not justified by science.

(Bloomberg, Reuters)

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