

Russia Bans Imports of Lithuanian Dairy Products

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Consumers are victims again as milk is the latest import good to be banned in the trade dispute between Lithuania and Russia. **Maxim Stulov**

Russia suspended all dairy imports from Lithuania on Monday without informing the Lithuanian government or companies involved, ratcheting up tension in the testy trade relationships between the two countries.

Lithuanian meat and fish imports may soon be subjected to heightened scrutiny as well, an individual familiar with the situation told Prime news agency.

In a statement Monday, the Federal Consumer Protection Service placed a comprehensive ban on all Lithuanian dairy products, citing “numerous infractions” of consumer protection and sanitary laws.

Chief Sanitary Inspector Gennady Onishchenko said coliform bacteria, traces of phthalate

plasticizers, and heightened levels of yeast and mold had been found in certain products. He also said that there were widespread discrepancies between product content and labeling, Interfax reported.

News of the impending ban spread in the mass media over the weekend after Onishchenko commented that Monday would probably see limitations placed on certain dairy products.

The Lithuanian government, however, has yet to receive official notification of the ban.

“For the time being, we are unable to speak about some measures being taken, because we have no grounds to say so. We have not received any notifications from the Russian Federation,” a spokesman for Lithuania's State Food and Veterinary Service said Monday, RIA Novosti reported.

Onishchenko said Monday that the Federal Consumer Protection Service had repeatedly voiced their concerns to the dairy companies but were hindered by the Lithuanian government, who “saw their role in admonition, threats, and commentaries unrelated to discussing the essence of the problem.”

But just as the government denied knowledge of the ban, the general director of one of Lithuania's largest dairy companies said Saturday that they had not received any complaints.

“It is a shame that no one informed us, that no one gave us the opportunity to eliminate any defects,” said Alexander Smagin, general director of Peino Zvaigzdes, whose products are sold in Russia under the brand Svalia.

“For us it will be a major blow as 35 percent of our exports go to the Russian market. I feel that we are the victims of an ill-conceived policy from those people who should protect our interests, but are not doing so,” Smagin added.

Onishchenko remarked Monday that the Russian economy will sustain no significant damage from the ban, describing the scale of Lithuania's imports as “lower than the margin of error.”

The ban is the latest in a series of trade sanctions that Russia has taken against former Soviet republics, which have been widely viewed as attempts to dissuade the countries from continuing to develop trade relations with the European Union.

Russian customs officials began scaling up inspections of delivery trucks from Lithuania in September, sometimes holding shipments for up to 20 days, Reuters reported.

Lithuanian Foreign Minister Linas Linkevicius said that his country could “theoretically” block Russia's road and rail access to the Russian exclave Kaliningrad, which shares a border with Lithuania, if impediments to trade continue.

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