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Russians Come Up With Alternative Uses for Confiscated Food Items

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The Federal Customs Service reported last month that it had seized 522 tons of banned food in the first six months of this year.

As a controversial presidential decree ordering the destruction of any embargoed Western food discovered being smuggled into the country comes into effect Thursday, Russian officials' imaginative ideas for how to get rid of the food have been met with counter-proposals by public figures.

Opponents of the decree have appealed to the common memory of a country where shortages of food — especially quality products — are far from unknown. But their calls to donate confiscated food items to the needy are apparently falling on deaf ears.

The government regulation published on July 31 does not specify a method for destroying confiscated Western food, saying only that it should be done by any available method that presents no danger to the environment, but officials have said it is most likely to be

incinerated.

Yulia Melano, spokeswoman for Rosselkhoznadzor, the state agriculture watchdog, told the TASS news agency on Monday that meat and dairy products will be burned because of biological risks.

The Fontanka news website reported Monday that the Agriculture Ministry is buying mobile crematoriums for that purpose from St. Petersburg company Turmalin at a cost of 6 million rubles ($100,000) for each crematorium.

The measures apply to imported food from Western countries that Russia banned last August in response to Western sanctions imposed on Russia over its involvement in the Ukraine crisis.

The sanctions list currently includes beef, pork, poultry, fish, fruit, vegetables, dairy products and nuts produced in the U.S., EU, Canada, Australia and Norway.

The ban was initially put in place for a year, but after Western countries recently extended sanctions against Russia, the measure was prolonged until August 2016.

Killing 2 Birds

The government regulation demands that the destruction of food be videotaped, triggering bitter jokes on Russian social networks that this could be a new use for thousands of surveillance cameras that have been used to monitor voting at ballot stations since the 2012 presidential elections — a practice that was canceled several weeks ago.

Another way to deal with Western meat and dairy would be to process it into protein flour and feed it to cattle, Rosselkhoznadzor's deputy head, Alexei Alexeyenko, told the Russian News Service website Monday.

Fruits and vegetables should be bulldozed, he said.

Previously, banned goods detected at the border were sent back to the countries of their origin. The idea of destroying confiscated food was coined by Agriculture Minister Alexander Tkachyov, and backed by President Vladimir Putin in a decree on July 29.

The Federal Customs Service reported last month that it had seized 522 tons of banned food in the first six months of this year, adding that it had only inspected one-tenth of the food imported into Russia during that period.

Deputy Prime Minister Arkady Dvorkovich said recently that between 700 to 800 offenses related to the smuggling of embargoed food had been registered since August last year.

Help the Needy

Meanwhile, the number of Russians living below the poverty line increased to almost 23 million people in the first quarter of this year and now accounts for 15.9 percent of the total population, according to Rosstat, the state statistics agency.

Russian public figures and ordinary citizens concerned about destroying food fit for consumption proposed their own uses for the banned products.

The Federation of Jewish Communities of Russia suggested distributing embargoed food among the poor.

“The Jewish community of Russia believes that the distribution of sanctioned food among orphanages and charitable organizations that help the homeless and the poor would be a dignified and humane alternative to the burning of forbidden products,” the federation’s head, Alexander Boroda, said Sunday.

The leader of Russia’s Communist Party, Gennady Zyuganov, proposed donating the prohibited food to orphanages, Orthodox communities and eastern Ukraine’s war-torn Donbass region, the RIA Novosti news agency reported Sunday.

“I would set up a commission that would accept and then send [the sanctioned food] to our friends in the Donetsk and Luhansk [self-declared people’s] republics,” Zyuganov was cited by RIA as telling the Rossia-24 television channel.

The destruction of sanctioned food is an extreme measure, the party leader said.

Maxim Suraikin, leader of the Communists of Russia party — which is not connected to Zyuganov’s organization — proposed sending banned Western products to Africa, the Izvestia newspaper reported Tuesday.

According to Suraikin, the move could raise the prestige of Russia among the African population, as well as help the state budget to save money currently spent on humanitarian aid to poor countries.

Russians who do not agree with what they say is the barbaric destruction of food have started an online petition calling for the repeal of the decree on the website change.org.

The initiators of the petition ask President Vladimir Putin and State Duma deputies to donate banned items to underprivileged and low-income people instead of destroying it.

“Why should we destroy fresh European food that could be given to war veterans, pensioners, the disabled, large families, victims of natural disasters and others in need?” the petition’s authors wrote.

The petition had been signed by more than 84,000 people by Tuesday evening.

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