November 13, 2023

The Honorable Thomas J. Vilsack
Secretary of Agriculture
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Ave., S.W.
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Secretary Vilsack:

On behalf of America’s cattle producers, the National Cattlemen’s Beef Association (NCBA) writes to you in strong opposition to the final rule that will allow the importation of fresh beef from Paraguay, starting next month. NCBA is concerned that USDA’s failure to use information from recent site visits in the risk assessment may pose great risk to the safety of the U.S. cattle herd. As you know, NCBA filed comments earlier this year calling on USDA to continue blocking fresh beef imports from Paraguay due to Paraguay’s history of foot-and-mouth disease (FMD) and the outdated information from site visits in 2008 and 2014 and the possible inadequacy of the data collected on those visits. We also raised concerns about Paraguay’s ability to fund and administer FMD safeguards and called into question the security of the borders they share with other countries including Brazil. NCBA urged USDA to continue the ban on Paraguayan beef imports until a thorough review can be conducted and we are assured Paraguay is able to provide an equivalent level of safety for U.S. consumers and livestock. Even though our concerns were disregarded, once again, we urge you to halt the implementation of this rule until a risk assessment can be completed based on recent site visits that can verify Paraguay’s claims of equivalent safety and risk mitigation measures.

To be clear, our concern is not limited to the age of the site visits, but the possible inadequacies of the data collected during the site visits. These concerns are based on the recommendations of the 2017 U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) report1 that cited major inadequacies in the USDA-APHIS data collection process for Brazil’s application to gain beef access to the U.S. market. Prior to the GAO report it was evident that USDA-APHIS lacked the management controls at site visits to determine minimal health status of a country. According to the proposed rule for Paraguay, APHIS dismissed the concerns over the age of the site visits by saying that APHIS reviewed more recent data provided by Paraguay and determined their conclusions were still valid. This determination was not verified with recent in-country site visits. The proper action from USDA at minimum, should be to delay the approval process until recent data can be collected through in-person visits consistent with the recommendations of GAO, not just paper reviews.

NCBA also raised concerns with the Paraguayan government’s reliance on private sector funding for most of the funding for its FMD mitigation measures. The major economic downturn of Paraguay in recent years calls into question the ability of the Paraguayan government to adequately implement FMD mitigation measures.2 USDA acknowledged and dismissed these concerns without much discussion. Adequate funding of the central competent authority responsible for implementing risk mitigation standards is not something that USDA should brush aside with a vaguely worded dismissal. FMD mitigation measures are only as trustworthy as the central competent authority’s ability to implement them. As history has repeatedly taught us with Brazil, not all central

---

2 Risk Analysis: Foot-and-Mouth Disease Risk from Importation of Fresh (Chilled or Frozen), Matured, Deboned Beef from Paraguay into the United States, APHIS-VS National Center for Import and Export, 2018.
competent authorities can be trusted to deliver their promises of equivalency. Should USDA decide to proceed with granting access to Paraguay, there should be 100 percent inspection of all Paraguayan beef imports for a minimum of one year, and USDA should move swiftly to suspend access if Paraguay's track record resembles the failures of Brazil. We should not simply take Paraguay's word for it – trust, but verify.

It is no secret that gaining beef access to the U.S. market has been the top priority for Paraguay in multiple rounds of trade discussions. Unfortunately, this is not the first time that a foreign country's beef access to the United States was a pre-determined outcome and used as a bargaining tool for other U.S. interests. The dismissal of legitimate concerns from U.S. cattle producers is unacceptable and USDA should halt this unscientific, unsafe rulemaking. While winning friends and allies in South America may be part of the long-term interests of U.S. diplomacy, it should not be done on the backs of U.S. cattle producers or by putting at risk the health and livelihood of the safest and most efficient cattle and beef production system in the world.

An FMD outbreak in the U.S. would cause catastrophic damage to the U.S. economy and cut off access to vital export markets which bring considerable added value to American cattle producers. The U.S. cannot endanger U.S. consumers or the U.S. cattle herd with a rulemaking process that uses outdated information from nine years ago. Mr. Secretary, I strongly urge you to listen to America's cattle producers and halt Paraguay's beef access to the United States until a risk assessment can be conducted based on current, reliable, and transparent information.

Sincerely,

Todd Wilkinson
President
National Cattlemen’s Beef Association