

China pushes back food import policy

28 September 2017 | News

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So as of now China has delayed enforcing sweeping new controls on food import. It gave no details, but the delay might help to avert concerns that shipments of meat, fruit, dairy and other products might be disrupted, hurting thousands of farmers and food processors who look to China a key growth market.

The food rules prompted remarkably broad opposition. Governments said little in public, but a coalition including the United States, European Union, Japan, Australia and Argentina lobbied Beijing to scale back the requirement. They urged China to follow global practice and apply it only to high-risk food.

Rules requiring each food shipment to have an inspection certificate from a foreign government were due to take effect this week, however Beijing has decided to grant a "transitional period of 2 years" following comments by other governments, according to a document submitted to the World Trade Organization (WTO).

In its defence, this step taken by China was to restrict imports in violation of its market-opening promises. But foreign suppliers complain Beijing already uses safety rules in ways that hamper access for beef and other goods.

The inspection rules follow an avalanche of scandals over Chinese suppliers caught selling tainted milk and other shoddy or counterfeit food. Western officials said they appeared to be meant to shift responsibility away from AQSIQ, which Chinese consumers often blame for safety failures.

This month, Beijing banned imports of soft cheese such as brie and camembert that it said contained the wrong types of bacteria. European officials complained the ban was unfair because the regulators permitted sales of similar cheeses produced in China using the same bacteria.

The dispute added to complaints that Beijing is reducing market access for goods ranging from medical technology to farm-related biotech.

Beijing made concessions including allowing governments to certify food as fit for human consumption instead of confirming it met Chinese quality standards. Still, the latest draft submitted to the WTO said the rules would apply to items including dried fruit, cocoa and spices that foreign officials said don't require such intensive inspection.