

Beef, is it safe for dinner?

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A shortage of lean beef has U.S. grocers and restaurants relying less on American cattle growers and buying more foreign meat, not regulated by the same FDA standards.

John Larkin has been in the cattle business for 40 years in Utah and has more than 2,000 head of cattle on his farm in Willard, Davis County. Every week Larkin sells four or five semi loads of cows to Millers Corp., one of the largest beef suppliers in Utah, and then heads down to Salina, Millard County, to buy younger cows to replenish his herd.

According to Larkin, the price of U.S. beef has been plummeting over the last six months. "It is the strong dollar that has hurt the market the worst, it makes imports cheap into the U.S.," Larkin said. "The monopoly and antitrust laws look the other way in this country."

Larkin said the price of cattle began to decrease by \$10 to \$20 a head in November and December of last year. Currently, Larkin loses \$50 a head, and he doesn't expect the market to rebound for another full year. Larkin will be able to survive despite the market fluctuations because he operates on a large scale and is a low-cost producer. "I see a good future in this business if you are competitive," Larkin said. "But for the smaller cattle outfits, there is no future for them."

According to Larkin, U.S. poultry producers are also suffering decreases in prices as a result of Russia's decision three weeks

ago to boycott U.S. poultry imports into their country, citing that it is unsafe.

Larkin said the lower price of imported beef and a U.S. shortage of lean beef have prompted several grocery store chains and fast food corporations to buy their meat overseas.

Utah Reform Party co-founder Barbara Jean Whiteley said the Reform party opposes trade policies that harm U.S. industries. "Dominant parties are proceeding with trade policies that are pernicious to the United States," Whiteley said.

Whiteley said an example of dangerous trade policies is the fast food chain McDonalds' recent announcement to start using imported beef. According to Whiteley this will be financially devastating to the U.S. beef industry and the consumer will also be negatively affected because there are no international quality standard for imported foods like the U.S. Food and Drug Administration has established.

"It's just another coal in the fire," Larkin said. "McDonalds is just following Burger King and Wendys, which both purchase beef from Australia and New Zealand because it is cheaper and lean meat is scarce in the U.S. right now."

Larkin said the danger in buying foreign meat is that it is not inspected as closely as U.S. beef and that cattle carcasses are not scrutinized as closely for disease in other countries. In addition, Larkin said the pesticides used on feed for foreign cattle are not monitored like they are in the U.S.

Larry Lewis, Public Information Officer for the Utah Department of Agriculture and Food, said most consumers are unaware that

they are even buying imported meat because the origin of meat is seldom labeled in the U.S.

"The consumer doesn't know what they are buying when they buy beef," Lewis said. "Foreign meat is dangerous because it is held to a different standard, in the U.S. We have 10 times the inspection process of foreign countries."

Lewis said that even if meat appears to be grown in the U.S., some countries find ways to sell their foreign cows as though they were raised locally. According to Lewis, one such practice involves raising the cattle outside of the U.S., transporting them to the states for a month, and then selling them as U.S. cattle.

Lewis said the solution to dangerous foreign imported meat is simple economics. "Consumers need to stand up to these foreign cattle producers and make them fall in line with U.S. regulations," Lewis said. "The USDA is also pushing for the labeling of U.S. meats, so that people who want to buy U.S. meat can."

Larkin said in the long run, taking action will be in the consumers' best interest. "We only have three or four packers left to process cattle in the U.S.," Larkin said. "Consumers need to be aware that the overseas meat situation could turn out like the energy supply crisis. If we become dependent on foreign countries for our meat, like we are for our energy, then we will have real fluctuations in prices."

