Farm crisis taking a bite out of imported beef sales

By Lee Rood Staff Reporter

Burger King became the fast-food restaurant in the Nebraska Union only after it agreed to use domestic beef.

James Griesen, University of Nebraska-Lincoln vice chancellor of student affairs, said the condition was so important that it was written into the contract.

He said Craig Cormack, owner of 15 area Burger Kings and the man with whom he negotiated the contract, was happy to comply with the restriction.

Because of the farm crisis and the national attention the Midwest has attracted lately, many fast-food restaurants and meat buyers around the country have started to use domestic beef, or have begun advertising to consumers that they have been doing so.

While most Midwestern franchises use domestic beef, many others on the East and West Coasts often import their meat from other

Barbara Watson, a statistical analyst for the U.S. Meat Export Federation in Denver, said those businesses import beef because lower quality imported beef is cheaper than domestic

Imported beef is mostly used as processing beef for the fast-food industry and to make products like bologna and sausage, Watson

That kind of meat doesn't need to be top quality, she said.

While importing beef may not make sense to ranchers worried about the balance of the domestic market and others concerned about the farm crisis, many buyers say it is important to look at both sides.

Rodger Pearson, executive director of the Nebraska Beef Board, said because imported beef is an emotional issue in the Midwest, many people forget to consider the repercussions of eliminating imported beef.

'If we cut off all imports, then they cut off all exports, and that would be a chance we'd have to take," he said.

If Americans want free trade, imports and exports cannot be restricted, Pearson said.

If we want to dispose of the (beef) products Americans don't use ... if we want to sell that,

we can't cut off imports," he said. By stopping beef imports, Pearson said, "we

might be cutting off our nose despite our face." Cormack said all his Burger Kings will use only domestic beef by the end of the month. He said he made the switch because he believes it is important to his customers.

"It is a sensitive issue in this area because of the agricultural environment," he said.

The switch will cost him about 3 cents more

a pound, but is worth it, he said. While Cormack said he can understand why it was important for potential consumers and university officials to make sure domestic beef was being used in the union, he said, the issue isn't so global anymore.

When we dealt with the university ... we used imported computers and they never asked us about that," he said.

The importance of using domestic beef in the Midwest is like the concern to buy U.S.-

made cars in Detroit, Cormack said. Some buyers refuse to buy imported beef for reasons other than the farm crisis.

David Sands, president of Standard Meats and beef supplier to Amigos, said there are other issues he considers more important.

For example, U.S. beef inspection is stricter here, he said.

"Other countries have the same requirements, but they can't check every pound of meat that comes into the country," Sands said.

In the past, there have been cases where kangaroo meat that was labeled beef was brought into the country from Australia, he said. Other meat has sometimes been tainted with pesticides like DDT, which is illegal in this country, he said.

Some imported beef comes from areas where rain forests were destroyed to clear the land so ranchers could raise cattle. Eliminating the rain forests can ruin delicate ecology and threaten the balance of the earth's oxygen

Sands, who considers himself an environmentalist, said the rain forest issue is reason enough for him not to buy imported beef.

Rain forest destruction has become a major issue in importing meat.

After several demon-rations and a grassroots lobbying effort by organizations such The Rainforest Action Network and Earth First!, and thousands of letters and phone calls from concerned consumers, the Burger King Corporation quit using beef from rain forest areas at the beginning of October.



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