

Australian Cattle Industry Responds to Expanded US Beef Imports

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The Australian cattle industry, valued at \$75 billion, is reeling from the federal government's decision to loosen restrictions on US beef imports, now including cattle born in Canada and Mexico. Announced on Thursday, the move has sparked fierce debate, with industry leaders demanding an independent review to safeguard the nation's biosecurity.

Cattle Australia, the industry's peak body, expressed cautious trust in the government's biosecurity assessment but voiced frustration over the lack of transparency. In an interview with ABC radio, Cattle Australia chief Will Evans stated, "When you have a \$75 billion industry relying on them not making a mistake, I'm sure they've been cautious." However, he later emphasized the need for an independent scientific panel, saying, "There's simply too much at stake for Australia's world-leading biosecurity status not to get a second opinion."

The decision follows a decade-long process, with expanded access for US beef, including Canadian and Mexican-born cattle, finalized after a five-year biosecurity review. Agriculture Minister Julie Collins defended the move, telling reporters in Canberra, "This is the culmination of a rigorous, science-based process. Australia's biosecurity system is world-renowned for a reason." The government insists the decision is unrelated to ongoing tariff negotiations with the US, despite claims from the Trump administration hailing it as a "major trade breakthrough."

Industry skepticism runs deep. James Jackson, a beef and cattle farmer and former president of NSW Farmers, told news.com.au, "I can't think of a reason why Australian businesses would import more expensive US beef." He pointed out that US ground beef retails at roughly \$9 per pound, far pricier than domestic options, and questioned the economic viability of imports. "It's like selling ice to Eskimos," he quipped, suggesting niche markets like high-end restaurants might be the only takers.

The timing of the announcement has raised eyebrows, with some speculating it's tied to Prime Minister Anthony Albanese's efforts to negotiate aluminum tariffs with the US. Tammi Jonas of the Australian Food Sovereignty Alliance noted, "It looks like kowtowing to Trump." She predicted minimal market impact, suggesting imports might only fill seasonal gaps during events like droughts, benefiting large multinational processors rather than local producers.

Concerns linger over past biosecurity risks, particularly mad cow disease, which previously restricted Canadian and Mexican cattle from US supply chains. The US claims it has resolved traceability issues, ensuring all cattle can be tracked from farm to market. However, Nationals Leader David Littleproud expressed alarm, telling reporters, "I'm gobsmacked. This exposes us to real health and biosecurity risks." He questioned whether political pressure from the US influenced the decision.

Australia's beef industry remains robust, exporting nearly 400,000 tonnes to the US in 2024 alone, while domestic demand is largely met by local production. With US beef prices soaring up 9% since January, industry figures argue imports are unlikely to disrupt the market. Still, Cattle Australia's call for a scientific review underscores the high stakes for an industry that prides itself on its global reputation for quality and safety.