survey finds AMERICANS LESS PICKY *about beef*

By Bonnie Coblentz

A recent Mississippi State University study suggests that Americans don't mind eating beef treated with growth hormones or fed genetically engineered corn nearly as much as European consumers do.

Jayson Lusk, assistant professor in MSU's Department of Agricultural Economics and MAFES agricultural economist, helped conduct a survey of consumers in France, Germany, the United Kingdom and the United States. He worked with Jutta Rossen from the Louvain-la-Neuve in Belgium and John Fox of Kansas State University.

The researchers were trying to determine whether consumer preferences for beef cattle administered growth hormones or fed genetically engineered corn were different in Europe and America. They were trying to see how these different preferences impacted trade policies.

"Since the late 1980s, the United States and the European Union have been involved in a contentious debate over trade of beef from cattle that have been implanted with anabolic growth hormones. The Europeans have banned U.S. imports of beef since 1989," Lusk said.

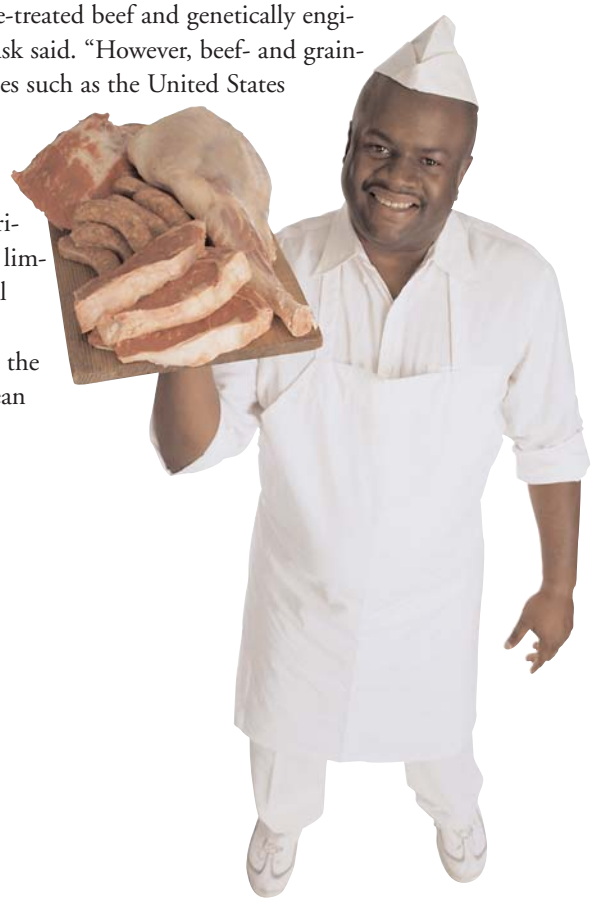
"Because the vast majority of fed cattle in the United States are administered added growth hormones to improve weight gain and feeding efficiency, U.S. producers have suffered from the loss of a valuable market," he said.

Surveys found that French consumers were willing to pay significantly more for beef from cattle not given growth hormones than were U.S., German or British consumers. They also found that the European consumers were willing to pay premium prices for beef from animals not fed genetically engineered corn.

Results suggest American consumers are willing to pay an additional $3 per pound for rib-eye steaks from cattle not fed genetically modified corn. Consumers in the three European countries were willing to pay more than $6 a pound extra for the same product. Opinions on meat from cattle treated with hormones were not as divided.

"Although the level of concern for hormone-treated beef was high in both the United States and the European Union, it was surprising that Germany, the United Kingdom and the United States put the same value on this type of meat," Lusk said. "This suggests there is little support for the argument that differences in consumer preferences for hormone-treated beef justify the European Union import ban."

The fact that Europeans surveyed expressed a strong desire not to buy beef from animals fed genetically modified corn suggests U.S. exporters will encounter strong resistance to future efforts to enter these markets with genetically modified products.

Lusk said the survey results indicate the European Union is unlikely to open its markets to U.S. beef. This is despite the fact that the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade does not allow nontariff trade barriers unless scientific evidence suggests a product is unsafe.

"The European Union claims that public health concerns constitute a valid basis for their trade restrictions on hormone-treated beef and genetically engineered crops," Lusk said. "However, beef- and grain-exporting countries such as the United States maintain that the European Union import ban protects domestic agricultural prices by limiting international competition and unfairly improves the welfare of European Union farmers."