



U.S.-Korean Food Fight
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Whether measured in terms of farmers markets, growing memberships in the Slow Food movement, or supermarkets like Wal-Mart selling locally grown produce, the eat-local phenomenon is exploding across the United States. Americans are increasingly concerned with what they put in their bodies and where their food comes from. They can point to good reasons: the obesity epidemic, food contamination, mad cow disease and avian influenza, the survival of small farmers, oil shortages and the massive amounts of energy used to ship food around the planet.

But as this healthy trend spreads across America's heartland, the U.S. government is working to deny South Koreans the right to local food and to undermine their domestic food safety laws through the Korea-U.S. Free Trade Agreement (FTA). On June 30, 2007, one day before President Bush's "fast-track authority" expired, U.S. and South Korean negotiators signed the FTA. It now awaits ratification by Congress through an up-or down vote without amendment. So far, the Democratic leadership has said that the FTA is "dead in the water," but on the unenlightened grounds that the FTA did not go far enough in prying open South Korea's auto and beef markets.

If enacted, the FTA will become the most economically significant trade deal since the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). Financial transactions between the two countries surpass \$74 billion annually. The United States also intends to use it as a model to expand trade liberalization throughout Asia. Like NAFTA, the FTA will forever change Korea's agricultural economy.

The Fate of Korean Farms

"In 1990, South Korea had 10 million farmers. Today, there are 3.5 million," said Sin Moon Hee of the Korean Women Peasants' Alliance. "This is what unfettered trade has done to us and to the Korean countryside."

In 2006, the United States exported \$3.4 billion worth of agricultural, fish, and forest products to South Korea, the sixth largest U.S. export market. U.S. agribusinesses are [salivating at the opportunity](#) to reach South Korea's 49 million consumers and the \$12 billion agricultural market through the FTA.

Pro-business interests argue that the FTA will make South Korean farmers more competitive, especially in cultivating rice, Korea's most economically and culturally significant crop. But Korean farmers have already undergone severe competition through market-opening reforms over the last two decades. The costs? Over 6.5 million farmers have been displaced and many traditional Korean crops, such as barley, wheat, corn, fruits, and cotton have virtually faded from the Korean countryside.

Korean peasants, so militant on the frontlines against the FTA, view the agreement as the final straw in a string of domestic and international policies systematically designed for their demise. During the 1960s and 1970s, South Korean peasants essentially subsidized the country's export-led industrial development. Then-dictator Park Chung-Hee intentionally depressed agricultural prices in order to acquire a steady flow of cheap labor to work in export factories. But this export-industrialization policy, which drove millions of farmers off the land, was mitigated by South Korean trade policies that limited imports with high tariffs and quotas. Farmers' incomes diverged considerably from those of urban workers in 1995 when the South Korean government joined the WTO and signed on to the Agreement on Agriculture (AOA).

Under the veil of making agriculture more competitive, the AOA forced developing countries to eliminate quotas and forced governments to import a minimum amount of agricultural commodities at a low tariff. While developing countries were shredding the safety net for their farmers, by the early 2000s, the United States and European Union (EU) were spending \$9-10 billion more on subsidies than they spent a decade earlier, with the bulk of subsidies going to larger, corporate farms. Small-scale farmers in the South were surviving off less than \$400 a year, while U.S. and EU farmers received on average \$16,000 to \$21,000 a year in subsidies. In 2003, the United States [dumped on the global market](#) five commodities at 10 to 47 percent below the cost of production.

Korean farmers get a fraction of what U.S. farms receive, but there is no comparison when it comes to scale. In the United States, the average rice farm is 397 acres, compared with South Korea's average rice farm of 3.5 acres. Approximately 8,000 of America's two million farms grow rice, compared with South Korea where over 787,000 farms—or 57 percent—cultivate rice. From 1995 to 2005, the U.S. rice industry received over [\\$10.5 billion in government subsidies](#), of which 25% went to the top 1%.

“It doesn't even matter that rice wasn't included in the text of the agreement,” said Young-Koo Heo, Vice President of the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions. “By 2014, Korea's rice market will be opened,” said Heo, referring to the AOA, “And that is the reason why rice does not have to be included in these negotiations.”

Going the Way of NAFTA

According to [Korea's National Policy Institute](#), when tariffs on 20 or more sensitive agricultural products are eliminated, within 10 to 15 years, the decline in production by Korean farms means the loss of \$1 to \$2 billion annually. Korea's agriculture could disappear in 10 to 15 years.

For example, tangerines account for up to 70 percent of Jeju Island's agricultural production. It is estimated that opening South Korea's citrus market to powerful U.S. companies like Dole and Sunkist will force a 59% drop in the price of tangerines and result in the loss to Korean farmers of over \$200 million. Seeing how the FTA will seal their fate, during the fourth round of FTA

negotiations on Jeju Island, thousands of peasant farmers swam 50 miles off the southern coast to confront more than 10,000 Korean riot police to make clear that they weren't going down without a fight.

President Roh has promised to set aside \$119 billion to aid farmers hurt by the FTA, but according to Cheehyung Kim of the Korean Alliance Against the FTA, this "is the 10-year sum of what the government already spends annually, and only a small portion of that amount translates into actual income." Current subsidies haven't offset the negative impacts of liberalizing Korean agriculture, so peasant farmers are highly skeptical of this promised arrangement.

Korean farmers may have felt the weight of the WTO, but they can see from Mexico's experience what a bilateral trade agreement with the United States will mean. Under NAFTA, approximately 1.5 million Mexican farmers were forced to give up farming because they were unable to meet the price of corn produced by massively subsidized U.S. agribusinesses. "Before NAFTA, our lives were not easy," said Norberto Jimenez, once a subsistence farmer in Oaxaca, Mexico and now a farmworker in Florida, "but we had enough food for ourselves and our families." Jimenez, like millions of Mexican farmers and peasants, were forced to migrate to other cities to find work in factories or risk their lives crossing the border for low-wage work.

Small-scale family farmers in the United States also took a hit from NAFTA and other trade liberalization policies. From 1997 to 2002, over 90,000 farms with under 2,000 acres disappeared in the United States. "Someone is benefiting from NAFTA and the FTAs," said Bill Christensen, a fourth-generation family farmer from Missouri, "but not family farmers." In the first year of NAFTA, Christensen says the profits of agribusiness giants Archer Daniels Midland skyrocketed from \$110 to \$300 million, and Cargill from \$468 to \$827 million. NAFTA advocates promised American consumers lower food costs, but since NAFTA, the price of food has jumped by 27 percent and money paid to farmers per dollar dropped from \$0.32 to \$0.19. What's kept our food costs relatively low then? "Immigrants," says Christensen. "They are the ones growing our food."

Dismantling Korea's Food Safety Laws

Not only will the FTA force the extinction of Korean farmers, it is working to undermine, and already has, South Korea's domestic food safety laws. As a precondition to even begin talks, South Korea agreed to re-import U.S. beef, which it banned since 2003 after the discovery of mad cow disease in the United States. U.S. boneless beef and from cattle under 30 months—considered a lower risk of containing bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE)—can now enter South Korea.

But since the ban was lifted last December U.S. beef shipments have been routinely returned because they contained bone fragments. Last month, South Korea received a shipment from the United States of a complete cattle spine, which has prompted South Korea to halt beef imports pending an explanation from the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

In response Max Baucus (D-MT), chair of the Senate Finance Committee, is threatening to block passage of the FTA unless South Korea changes its domestic food safety laws. To South Koreans, U.S. beef is not just a matter of trade. It has become the measuring stick of public health and food safety in Korea.

U.S. biotech companies, running out of places to export agricultural products containing genetically modified organisms (GMOs) due to worldwide opposition, have turned to the FTA as a way to undermine the [Cartagena Protocol of the Convention on Biological Diversity](#), a multilateral treaty that imposes labeling rules on agricultural and food exports. According to [media reports](#), the United States and South Korea allegedly signed a Memorandum of Understanding that stipulates that when Korea ratifies the Cartagena Protocol, it will not apply the labeling rules to agricultural and food imports from the United States, which is not a party to the treaty. Even an April 17 press release from the [Biotechnology Industry Organization](#) (BIO) refers to a "separate understanding" on agricultural biotechnology. The United States and Canada, also not a signatory, put this waiver into place with Mexico under NAFTA. According to the Korean Alliance Against the Korus FTA, the side deal will drastically weaken South Korea's legislative authority to implement the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety.

FTA's Future

In 20 years, will Korean meals consist of rice from Arkansas, beef from Montana, and fruit from California? If global food trends are any indication, this scenario has a high probability of coming true. But the costs will be enormous, not just for Korea's diminishing agricultural biodiversity, but the peoples' general sense of security, as they will be beholden to U.S.-dominated agribusinesses for food imports.

Millions of Korean farmers—most of them in the 60s—will either die in poverty or seek work in an already saturated urban job market. More than 50 percent of South Korea's workforce are "irregular" workers, meaning they don't have the same rights as workers with benefits, including the right to unionize. "The fight against the FTA is a class struggle, and who wins in this fight will determine the outcome," says Jun-Sub Seo of the Korean Alliance.

President Roh is seeking ratification of the FTA before the end of his term this year. In the United States, the Korea FTA may come up for a vote in Congress this year, but it all depends on how the Peru and Panama FTAs fare. So far, presidential candidates Hillary Clinton and John Edwards have come out against the Korea FTA, siding with the auto bloc led by Sander Levin (D-MI). But the alliance of agribusinesses, biotech firms, pharmaceutical giants, and financial services firms might be too powerful in the end.

It may all come down to the resistance of Korean peasants and trade unionists against the WTO and now the FTA. Whether leading the procession of thousands to tear down the metal barricades in Cancun or swimming across freezing waters at the WTO meeting in Hong Kong, South Koreans have been at the forefront of dismantling the perception that these global trade institutions are beyond the peoples' reach.

Locavores in the United States can and must help. In an act of global solidarity and recognizing our interdependence, the local food movement in the United States should demand a moratorium on "free trade" agreements to save the world's farmers and our right to have locally grown food free of corporate control.