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Israel

Kosher Foods

**Israeli Requirements for Recognition of Kosher
Slaughter in the U.S.**

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Report Highlights:

This report sets out Israel's Chief Rabbinate's slaughtering requirements for certifying beef and lamb and their products as kosher.

Includes PSD changes: No
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The Chief Rabbinate of Israel's Requirements for Recognition of Kosher Slaughter in the U.S.

Israel's annual consumption of red meat is estimated at close to 100,000 mt. While only some 25 percent of the population considers itself observant or orthodox in observance of Jewish law, between 70 and 80 percent of that same population consume only kosher meat and poultry. The Office of Agricultural Affairs in the U.S. embassy in Tel Aviv estimates that the market for high quality non kosher U.S. beef may be a few thousand metric tons. Given market development activities and sales promotion, the market for kosher U.S. beef could exceed 5,000 mt within five years and ultimately be developed to 15-20 thousand mt.

Until 1993, the Government of Israel was the sole buyer of meat from abroad. It imported only kosher meat. The key criterion for choosing cuts was price and the Israeli population was subjected to imports of very low quality kosher slaughtered beef, mainly from Latin America. In 1993 meat imports were liberalized and private elements entered the market. Initially, they were not constrained to buying only kosher meat. Very rapidly, a market for the prime cuts of high quality American beef developed, mainly for use in tourist restaurants and specialty stores.

In December, 1994 the Knesset, Israel's parliament passed the Kosher Meat Import Law which requires that all meat and poultry and their products imported into Israel be accompanied by a certificate of kashrut issued by the Chief Rabbinate of Israel or any other body authorized by it to issue such a certificate. Another law states that the Chief Rabbinate of Israel is the sole authority to determine kashrut with respect to food to be consumed in Israel.

Legislation of the Kosher Meat Import Law nipped in the bud a promising flow of choice cuts from high quality grain-fed American beef to Israel. The main problem appeared to be in the economics of conducting kosher slaughter in the U.S. according to the demands of Israel's rabbinate. While accepting the kashrut of American Jewish cattle slaughter for the Jewish population of the United States, Israel's Chief Rabbinate rejects this method for beef which is to be consumed in Israel. The Israeli method, or more accurately, the Jerusalem method of slaughter slows down the killing rate, requires special equipment - a "turning box" - and requires a larger slaughter team, some members of which must be representatives of the Chief Rabbinate of Israel. The initial low volumes of exportable beef could not carry the financial burden of the extra costs. Following the 1994 legislation, all but one company changed their minds about slaughtering for export to the Holy Land. Interest in the Israeli market, however, has not weakened. There is a continuous flow of queries and expressions of intentions to begin slaughter and export to Israel. The issue of U.S. beef has been on the agendas of most, if not all of the U.S-Israel Joint Economic Committee (JEC) meetings which have been held since 1994.

Following is a summary of two meetings with representatives of the Kashrut Department of Israel's Chief Rabbinate on the Rabbinate's requirements for recognition of kosher slaughter. The meetings took place on March 16, 1999 with potential commercial importers of kosher beef and on March 01, 2000 with representatives of the Ministry of Industry and Trade.

As the Chief Rabbinate provided the summary of the second meeting and the importers summarized the first, this report will be based on a translation of the Rabbinate's document and complemented with additional information from the summary of the first meeting.

The purpose of the meeting with the representatives of the International Trade Administration of the Ministry of Industry and Trade was to hear the requirements of the Rabbinate with respect to importation of beef. At the outset Rabbi Ezra Harrari Raful, Director of the Foreign Slaughter Division of the Chief Rabbinate, provided a review of slaughter methods and kashrut requirements in various countries. He emphasized the possibilities of importing beef from the U.S. and indicated that the Rabbinate's requirements are "clear and uniform" for all countries exporting meat to Israel.

The Rabbinate will approve a slaughtering plant after a visit to the premises by representatives of the Foreign Slaughter Division. They will ensure that the plant is suitable for kosher slaughter and has sufficient space to accommodate a supervisor and an external examiner (see below). The Rabbinate will only examine plants which have received prior approval from the Israel Veterinary Services (IVS). The latter have produced a book with full specifications of the veterinary requirements, including diagrams of the equipment. This is available to any Israeli importer interested in obtaining IVS approval of a plant for export to Israel.

The slaughter must take place while the animal is in a prone position. It is possible to use a turning box for this purpose. A turning box is a frame which catches the animal and turns it ninety degrees, enabling the ritual slaughterer to make the knife cut without applying pressure other than the weight of the knife itself. The turning box method is used throughout exporting countries of Europe and in one plant in the U.S. (Agriprocessors, of Postville, Iowa). The method employed in Latin America involves tying the animal and lying it on the floor on its back.

It is forbidden to use any form of electric prod to herd the animals into the slaughtering stand. Similarly, no electric current can be applied to accelerate the drainage of blood from the carcass after the slaughter.

No means of stunning can be applied either prior to or after the slaughter. Similarly, no means of paralyzing the brain, e.g. with a bolt or firing a bullet into any of the animal's nerve centers, can be employed.

Each animal must be numbered consecutively prior to separation of the head from the carcass.

The production line must be so designed as to allow sufficient room and ample time for the examiners to perform their functions. The "internal check" of the lungs is conducted while they are still intact in the carcass. Immediately thereafter, they are removed with the heart still attached, to the table of the "external examiner" for a second examination. No veterinary or other examination can be performed before the external examiner has completed his examination.

After the external examiner has determined the kosher status of the animal, the supervisor will stamp the carcass with an indelible mark indicating either kosher or "glatt" (smooth - a higher degree of kashrut).

Rejected carcasses are to be marked not kosher by a cross cut on the muscles of the front legs. Cold storage of the slaughtered carcasses must be organized with clear separation of the kosher and the non-kosher meat in the cooler.

Cutting and packing of the meat will be according to usual veterinary practices - on the day following the slaughter and after a repeat examination of the markings by the supervisor to ensure that the animal is kosher. Cutting and packing of kosher and non-kosher meat cannot take place simultaneously in the same room. Cutting of the kosher meat will take place in the morning, after which the non-kosher product can be cut and packed.

A slaughter team for up to 200 head per day should have five slaughterers/examiners plus three supervisors. Increasing the line speed will require additions to the team. Maximum line speed cannot exceed 100 head per hour up to a maximum of 500 animals per day. Production of offal requires additional supervisors, according to plant conditions and ritual requirements.

It is possible to employ some local slaughterers and examiners, provided they are tested and approved in advance by the Chief Rabbinate of Israel.

Additional requirements, reported by a potential importer include:

The Chief Rabbinate will inspect the rabbinical certification of all local slaughterers and prefers to see letters of recommendation from recognized religious authorities prior to approval for service on a slaughtering team for Israel.

It requires a video of the plant including the slaughtering and salting processes. This is in addition to a written description of the layout and of the slaughtering method.

It also requires a list of all ingredients and additives used if the meat is further processed. The list should include both the commercial and the scientific names of any reagents and other materials.

The meat to be exported can be cut from the tenth rib forward and above the diaphragm. Shipment of any cuts obtained from behind the tenth rib, such as the sirloin, the tenderloin etc., requires an additional process involving the removal of a number of tendons and fat nodules. This can be done by a local specialist or one from the Chief Rabbinate. Such specialists, known as “Menakrim” (singular - menakair), are a rare breed, hence quite costly to employ. A company interested in selling the choice cuts in a kosher market would be well advised to arrange for the training of a number of menakrim. Such people do not have to be Jewish to perform their function and could be employed and trained locally.