

## Talks to consider farm tariffs

**Ken Belson** The New York Times  
Thursday, February 13, 2003

### WTO group faces March deadline for agreement

**TOKYO** Trade ministers from two dozen of the world's largest economies will meet in Tokyo this weekend to hash out guidelines for the reduction of agricultural tariffs and other measures, part of the World Trade Organization's Doha round of talks.

At the center of the three days of meetings, which begin on Friday, is a debate over how to calculate cuts in tariffs and subsidies on rice, beef and other produce.

The United States, Australia and other large exporters want tariffs limited to no more than 25 percent for all agricultural products.

The other major bloc, which includes the European Union, Japan and South Korea, favor trimming tariffs by an average of 36 percent.

The negotiators will probably be presented with a proposal written by the chairman for the special committee on agriculture for bridging the gap.

They must reach an agreement on the issue by March 31, a significant task given the distance between the two main groups and the need to incorporate a spectrum of opinions in the 145-member group.

Though the WTO has made progress in reduced tariffs on manufactured goods and services, agriculture has always wound up with more exemptions than concessions.

For years, the U.S. side, allied with the 17-member Cairns Group of food-producing countries, has put pressure on WTO members to lower tariffs to allow for more imports of grain, fruit and meat.

The Europeans, particularly the French, as well as the Japanese, have tried to protect small, politically powerful farm lobbies.

More recently, the EU and Japan have broadened their defense, arguing that protecting farmers is not just about food, but also about preserving the environment, rural regions and national self-sufficiency.

Japan, already the world's largest net importer of food, says it is unfairly accused of hindering imports, even though tariffs on imported rice, for example, are 490 percent.

"There are lines that we can not concede to," said one senior Japanese negotiator. "It's not that our markets are closed. Our proposals are the middle of the road."

Like in many industrialized countries, workers are leaving their farms for higher paying jobs in the city. That has necessitated more imports, pushing Japan's self-sufficiency rate in food below 40 percent.