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## **U.S. FDA moves to dampen fears it will ban cheese aged on wood**

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WASHINGTON (Reuters) - The U.S. Food and Drug Administration moved on Tuesday to tamp down fears among artisanal cheesemakers that it was poised to ban the practice of aging cheese on wooden boards.

The agency said it did not have a new policy banning wooden shelves in cheese-making, adding there was no requirement in recent food safety regulations requiring the agency to address the issue.

In January, Monica Metz, an FDA official, responded to questions posed by the New York State Department of Agriculture and Markets, which sought clarification on the FDA's policy after several cheesemakers in the state were cited for their use of wooden shelves during FDA inspections.

Metz said the use of the shelves did not conform to good manufacturing practices that require that "all plant equipment and utensils shall be so designed and of such material and workmanship as to be adequately cleanable, and shall be properly maintained."

Her comments caused a furor in the artisanal cheese-making community, where rumors flew that the FDA was poised to ban the practice.

"A sense of disbelief and distress is quickly rippling through the U.S. artisan cheese community," wrote Cheese Underground blogger Jeanne Carpenter.

The FDA said it had no new policy and had never taken any action against a cheesemaker based solely on the use of wooden shelves. Historically, the agency has cited cheesemakers when shelves were poorly cleaned.

"In the interest of public health, the FDA's current regulations state that utensils and other surfaces that contact food must be 'adequately cleanable' and properly maintained," Lauren Sucher, an FDA spokeswoman, said in a statement.

"Historically, the FDA has expressed concern about whether wood meets this requirement and has noted these concerns in inspectional findings," she said. "FDA is always open to evidence that shows that wood can be safely used for specific purposes, such as aging cheese."

Fears over the rumored ban caused confusion about imports of cheese from Europe, where wood-aging is used to make cheeses such as Comte, Beaufort and Reblochon.

"Did the FDA just ban European cheese?" Cato Institute trade policy analyst Bill Watson wrote in a blog post on Tuesday.

The European Union and United States are already at odds over Europe's desire to keep the exclusive right to names such as parmigiano reggiano and asiago, preventing U.S. cheesemakers from marketing their products using those names.

Rebecca Sherman Orozco, a spokeswoman for the American Cheese Society, said that "for centuries, cheesemakers have been creating delicious, nutritious, unique cheeses aged on wood."

The FDA's Sucher said the agency would "engage with the artisanal cheese-making community to determine whether certain types of cheeses can safely be made by aging them on wooden shelving."