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Int'l. Consortium Expresses Concern Over EU's Attempt to Claim Common Cheese Names

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The Consortium for Common Food Names (CCFN) is voicing its concern over the European Union's (EU) attempt to claim common cheese names such as "parmesan" and "feta" under the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (T-TIP).

Such a move could wreak havoc on the U.S. dairy industry, cost American farmers and cheese processors up to \$5.2 billion in lost sales, and harm the nation's economy, according to a recent CCFN report.

"U.S. manufacturers would face a choice of abandoning markets for cheeses like feta and parmesan or selling them under names like 'crumbly white cheese' or 'hard grated cheese'," according to Connie Tipton, president and CEO of the International Dairy Foods Association. "It's not hard to imagine the problems those name changes would create."

The T-TIP was announced in 2013 by President Obama as an "ambitious and comprehensive trade agreement that significantly expands trade and investment between the United States and the EU."

According to the Office of the United States Trade Representative, the purpose of T-TIP is to increase "economic growth, jobs, and international competitiveness."

But opponents say restricting common cheese names to EU nations would actually decrease jobs and depress economic growth and competitiveness for U.S. cheese producers.

"The terms of that agreement restrict some common cheese names solely to the use of European companies, meaning that our products in that market can no longer use those names. We certainly have apprehensions about how this will play out if the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership solidifies Europe's hold on those names," said Jim Mulhern, President and CEO of the National Milk Producers Federation (NMPF).

According to the International Trademark Association, a geographical indication (GI) is "a sign used on a product to denote its origin where a specific quality, characteristic, or reputation of the product is essentially attributable to that origin."

Under T-TIP, signatory countries can claim a GI if the food - such as parmesan, provolone, bologna and salami - originated within their borders, even if the names have long since become part of the public domain.

“The European Union advocates extending GI (geographical indication) protections beyond a small number of specialty foods to cover many food names that have little to no geographic identity and have long been commonly used by food producers around the world.” NMPF said in an [October 11 press release](#).

“Instead of protecting the names of a few specialty foods linked to specific areas, the EU uses GIs to eliminate competition for its producers.”

“Essentially, Europe wants to drastically expand the scope of protection provided under geographical indications to keep those in other regions from using names that have long been in the public domain,” such as black forest ham and asiago cheese, [agreed Louie Gentine](#), third-generation CEO of Sargento Foods, who opposes the proposed name changes.

“Arguing that a small group of European producers should have exclusive right to these names is like claiming that only Italians should be permitted to use the term pizza,” Gentine said.

“At the heart of Europe’s approach to GI protection is the idea of *terroir* – that there is an essential nexus between a product’s characteristics and the place it was made....

"Supporters claim that strong GI protection is needed to prevent fraud, ensure fairness, and promote economic development," K. William Watson of the [CATO Institute](#) pointed out in a policy paper, *Reign of Terroir*.

“In truth, Europe’s approach to GI protection mainly serves to privilege traditional producers at the expense of consumer welfare and economic growth. The connection between quality and origin is often exaggerated by European policymakers, and the level of protection that GIs enjoy prevents the flow of accurate information to consumers.

“Moreover, by incentivizing traditional production patterns through communal rights, Europe’s GI system directly reduces both innovation and competition in their own market,” Watson added.

Errico Auricchio, president of [Belgioiso Cheese, Inc.](#) and chairman of the CCFN, moved to Green Bay, Wisconsin from Italy in 1979 to continue his great-grandfather’s legacy of crafting fine Italian cheeses. Auricchio says he fears that his company will face closure if the EU is allowed to restrict the use of some common cheese names.

“It is companies like mine, companies that brought European cheese-making skills to this country many years ago, that will suffer greatly under Europe’s totally unjustified plans to seize the right to use common cheese names for the exclusive use of European cheese makers,” Auricchio said.

“I will be forced to abandon markets I worked many years to build or sell cheese under names my customers do not recognize. I’m sure you could imagine what that would do. Cheese plants

like mine all over the country will be faced with cutbacks or closure. We simply must not let this happen.”