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## Russia's Latest Export: Bad Jokes About U.S. Chickens

By MICHAEL WINES

**M**OSCOW, March 1 — Weary, perhaps, of tolerating American diktats on everything from steel exports to NATO expansion, Russian officials are poised to strike a retaliatory blow at one of the United States' soft spots: its thighs. Chicken thighs.

Agriculture Minister Aleksei V. Gordeyev said today that his office had stopped issuing permits to import American chicken, the single most popular item from the United States. Within 10 days, he said, Russia may issue an outright ban against American chicken.

The issue, he said, is whether American fowl are too foul for Russians to eat. "Russia is not a garbage dump for poor quality food," he told the Interfax news service, "and if specific answers are not received, imports themselves will be stopped from March 10."

Mr. Gordeyev's pronouncement capped a virtual drumstick-beat of warnings from Russian officials that much of American poultry — loaded with antibiotics, stuffed with hormones and preservatives and generally unnatural — presents an unacceptable threat to Russian health.

Others suspect the minister may be reacting to pressure from Russian farmers, who are battling a deluge of cheap American chickens. Still others believe the government is simply playing good politics, showing the Russian flag in the face of what most Russians regard as an insulting American attitude toward them.

The Moscow business daily Kommersant pretty much summed that up today with an article on the accusations of drug-and-hormone-fed chicken that made a sly reference to the disqualification of Russian skiers at the Salt Lake City Olympics: "They banned chicken for doping," the headline read.

Puns aside — difficult as that is — the chicken flap is no laughing matter to American farmers, who send more birds to Russia than anywhere else.

American chicken is so popular that the slang term for it is "Bush legs" — an allusion to the rush of thighs and legs after the first President Bush dispatched food aid to hungry Russians in the early 1990's.

The National Chicken Council, an American trade group, estimates that Russians consumed a record one million tons of chicken from the United States in 2001 — in appendage terms, about 1.28 billion legs.

"Leg quarters are our big items of export," said Richard Lobb, the council spokesman. "Overseas markets prefer dark meat, and U.S. markets prefer the white meat."

One million tons is 8 percent of the entire United States chicken production, and 61 percent of all the chicken eaten in Russia. More important, it is a 75 percent increase over the American chicken exports

to Russia in 2000, a statistic that has sent shivers of alarm through Russia's young poultry industry.

The Russians worry that an American chicken juggernaut threatens to wipe out a domestic poultry industry that was just starting to recover after the financial collapse of 1998.

Russian chickens, which not so long ago resembled underfed robins, have vastly improved in both weight and quality in the last few years, but producers find it hard to compete on price. In part, that is because the farms are inefficient: the Agriculture Ministry says fewer than 20 percent of the chicken farms run at capacity, and nearly 80 percent need reconstruction.

Ukraine and Estonia, laboring under the same disadvantage, have moved to ban American imports in recent months. Russian farmers have complained bitterly to the agriculture minister about foreign competition, and there has been talk of a five-point increase in tariffs for imported chicken of all kinds.

Something of a propaganda campaign against the evils of American chickens has also emerged. The Web site [www.pravda.ru](http://www.pravda.ru), an extension of the newspaper, reported acidly on Wednesday that "Bush legs" are hardly known for their tastiness.

"But the majority of Russian people like their inexpensive price, though they understand that cheap products — especially if they are of American origin — are not likely to be good for your health," the article said.

And TVRK Moscoviya, the television channel of the province that includes Moscow, took a broad shot at American chicken on a recent edition of its "Farmer's Outpost" program.

"Take the American chicken-leg quarter, roast it, and what do you have left? Only the skin and bone," Yevgeny Elizarov, director of the Concoursni poultry farm, said on the program. "The moisture comes out, but there's no meat there. The foreign birds are vaccinated against 12 diseases, and we don't know what they're feeding the birds."

That was a windup for the coup de grâce: "Have you noticed that they only sell left Bush legs?" Mr. Elizarov told the camera. "That's because all the injections are made into the left leg. It's true! That means there are no right Bush legs on the market, only left ones. It means they don't eat them themselves, but send them over to us.

"Bon appétit!"