

China postpones delivery of two lakh tonne US wheat

WASHINGTON, Apr 5: China has postponed delivery of 200,000 tonnes of soft winter wheat that was to have taken place by this May until the June-May trade period of 1996-1997, the agriculture department said here yesterday, reports AFP.

Joe Victor of the brokerage firm Allendale attributed the Chinese move to higher prices for wheat shipments made before the end of the current trade year than for those scheduled to take place this summer.

Wheat currently being loaded aboard vessels in the Gulf of Mexico costs 5.93 dollars a bushel compared with 5.05 dollars for wheat to be loaded in July.

Victor said China was in no hurry at the moment to receive additional shipments, as an order of 500,000 tonnes was already on its way there.

In addition, following the discovery several weeks ago of an infection known as karnal bunt fungus in a small sampling of US wheat, China has decided to restrict its purchases to grain loaded before April 1.

Farming in air!

SINGAPORE, Apr 5: Vegetables are to be grown in the air in land scarce Singapore as part of a bid to produce pesticide-free, quality crops and reduce the city state's food import bill, reports AFP.

Devised by local scientists, the "aeroponics" technology for growing vegetables is the first to be developed for large scale crop production in the tropics, officials here say.

Initially only temperate and sub tropical crops will be produced beginning with salad greens such as lettuce, Chinese kale, spinach and cocktail tomatoes, said Ricky Lau Managing Director of Tropical Aeroponics Pte. Ltd.

Lau's company, which adopted the technology from Singapore's Nanyang Technological University (NTU), is setting up a 5.6 hectare (13.8 acre) aeroponics farm which could begin production as early as June.

Under the soil less cultivation system, seedlings will be planted in troughs made of styrofoam with their roots suspended in the air beneath an insulating cover scientists said.

Under the cover, air will be cooled through machines to simulate the conditions of the temperate and sub tropical homes of these plants.

Growth is supported by supplying the roots of the vegetables with nutrients and moisture in the form of mist dispensed through sprinklers, the scientists said.

Citibank workers stage protest

JAKARTA, Indonesia, Apr 5: Hundreds of workers of Citibank of the United States staged a slowdown protest Thursday, demanding an annual bonus, reports AP.

Some 380 employees wore signs with slogans such as "We Want Bonus '77 Billion" and "We Want General Increase."

Haydatus Badjuri, chairman of the government-sponsored union at the bank, cited a report by the local magazine Infobank that Citibank's Jakarta office earned 77 billion rupiahs (32.7 million dollars) in 1995.

Only some of the bank's managers receive annual bonuses now, but the union wants bonuses for all employees.

Edwin Gerungan, a bank manager, said bonus policies were set by the bank's headquarters and the demand could not be met. He said regular pay raises were being negotiated.

NZ govt may sell forestry corp in 5 months

WELLINGTON, Apr 5: Finance Minister Bill Birch said today he expects the government-owned forestry corp would be sold in four to five months' time, reports AFP.

He said the government was calling for international tenders for the corporation which owns cutting rights to 188,000 hectares (464,360 acres) of exotic plantation forest in the central north island, including the Kaingaroa forests — the world's largest man-made forest.

The holding accounts for about 12 per cent of the country's total planted forests and has a projected book value of 2.1 billion New Zealand dollars (1.43 billion US dollars) on June 30, 1996.

Birch said the government had decided to open the tender process because of the value of the forests and the opportunities it would create for New Zealanders.

"There'll be a transparent sale process which will take four to five months," he told a press conference.

"We want to make the most of the value of the crop by being certain we have investors participating in processing and adding export value to be trees and providing jobs for New Zealanders," he said.

UK's cattle farmers grow desperate over beef crisis

LONDON, Apr 5: Britain's cattle farmers and dairymen are growing desperate over the beef crisis, their leaders said Thursday, but the government held out little hope of getting the export ban on British beef lifted, reports AP.

Britain, attempting to overcome a panic over "mad cow disease" in its beef and dairy herds, has agreed to the slaughter of all cattle over the age of 30 months — the animals most likely to be infected. Some argue for the destruction of even more animals to renew consumer confidence.

"We've had farmers ringing us and saying 'If they try to shoot my first,' farmers union official Anthony Gibson told BBC Radio.

"There are some very angry beef producers out there demanding to know what the government is going to do to protect their livelihoods," said Gibson, southwest regional director of the National Farmers Union.

Britain won 70 per cent financial compensation this week from the European Union for a partial cull of the herd, but could not persuade the trade block to lift its total ban on British beef exports.

The ban was imposed after Britain's March 20 announcement of a possible link between the cattle brain disease bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE) or mad cow disease.

Agriculture Minister Douglas Hogg held out little hope of the export ban being raised before the next scheduled EU review at the end of the month.

"I think they had unbased expectations as to what one can do," he told BBC radio, describing his talks with European agriculture ministers in Luxembourg this week.

There was constant talk, for example, of eradicating BSE in a very short period of time as a condition of lifting the ban. Now that is simply not possible,"

National Farmers Union president Sir David Naish, who met Wednesday night with Hogg and Prime Minister John Major, said the prime minister had called the beef crisis one of the most serious problems he had known in his political career.

There are people with very, very major problems," Naish said.

George Lyon, Vice-President of the Scottish National Farmers Union, called on the government to add to the European measures, which he says "do not go nearly far enough" to help farmers, processors and connected industries.

"We are looking ruin within days unless a comprehensively package is put in place," he said.

It had cut prices in half last week and sold out stocks in all 363 stores, then returned prices to normal on Tuesday with its beef labelled by origin in Ireland or approved British farms.

Sainsbury's, a major British supermarket chain, offered a ray of hope, announcing its beef sales had returned to 80 per cent of normal on Tuesday and Wednesday.

After seeing a preview of their findings last month, the government reversed its assertion that there was no evidence people could get CJD from eating cows infected with bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE) or mad cow disease.

The warnings come in the first publication of the report that last months prompted the British government to admit to possible links between beef and CJD, and in two letters to the respected Lancet medical journal.

Dr Robert Will and colleagues at the National Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease Surveillance Unit in Edinburgh described the 10 cases they found that seemed different from other CJD cases in part because the victims were much younger than the average age of 63 at which CJD usually strikes.

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The president said he signed the measure with reservations because it "fails to provide an adequate safety net for family farmers."

The fixed payments in the bill do not adjust to changes in market conditions, which would leave farmers and the rural communities in which they live vulnerable to reductions in crop prices or yields," the president said.

The massive legislation covers a broad range of nutrition, environmental, specific crop and rural development issues.

While elimination farm subsidies, it also terminates government controls over what farmers can plant or what fields must be left idle.

Clinton said he was "keenly aware that farm legislation is long overdue and American farmers need to know now the conditions under which they are operation."

The seven-year "Freedom to Farm" bill would end the link between prices and subsidies, instead guaranteeing farmers steadily declining "market transition payments" based on past subsidies.

With farmers knowing exactly how much they will receive from the government, they will be able to plan ahead saving money for hard times, supporters said.

But critics warned that the new system could leave farmers vulnerable when prices or production are down and that it is unseemly to pay farmers who let their land sit idle.

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