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American cheese makers get taste of EU red tape

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THE cheese makers of rural Wisconsin would not usually spend much time worrying about the European Union (EU).

About 6,500km away from Brussels, they are too busy producing 1.17-billion kilograms of cheese a year and fending off challengers for the title of cheese capital of the US.

But now the EU is a regular topic of anxious conversation among Wisconsinites, who refer to themselves proudly as “cheeseheads”.

“Europe has become this spectre looming over us,” said Kathy Martin, the owner of the Hillbilly Hollow goat dairy in Conover, a town of about 1000 residents.

Wisconsin’s fears stem from an EU push to stop US dairy makers using what it says are specifically European names of cheese varieties.

The EU says that names such as feta, parmesan, gorgonzola and others are “geographical indicators” linked to specific European regions and Americans should not be permitted to use the names, even if they are made in the same way.

The plan would give the cheese varieties the same protection that prevents Californian sparkling wine being called champagne or Canadian whiskey being labelled Scotch.

“Salty white cheese does not have the same ring to it as ‘feta’,” said John Umhoefer, the executive director of the Wisconsin Cheese Makers Association.

He said that many families making cheese were still using recipes brought over by their ancestors in the 1800s, and could face bankruptcy if forced to abandon those names.

European sources said 20 to 25 of the regional brands were a “real problem” in EU-US trade talks, but gouda, provolone, pecorino and mozzarella were not included because they were not protected in Europe.

In a rare moment of bipartisanship, 50 Republican and Democrat senators wrote to the US trade negotiators, urging them to reject any EU plan “that would restrict in any way the ability of US producers to use common cheese names”.

Republican senator Pat Toomey said: “Can you imagine going into a grocery store and cheddar and provolone are called something else?”

The EU has already closed some foreign markets to what it deems the impostor cheeses.

American cheese makers are unable to sell parmesan in South Korea unless they rebrand it, and Washington fears Europe may use free-trade agreements to spread those restrictions.

The cheese regulators of Brussels have shown at least some ability to compromise in the past. In Canada, where 91% of feta is made locally, the EU trade deal allows it to be sold as long as the packaging “does not evoke Greece” with the Greek alphabet or ancient ruins and is clearly labelled as Canadian feta-style of feta-like cheese.

About 1,200 regional food names — such as Parma ham, cognac and sherry — are protected in the EU under legislation to “identify a product as originating in the territory of a particular country, region or locality where its quality, reputation or other characteristic is linked to its geographical origin”. “It’s so absurd it sounds like a Monty Python sketch,” said Abby Morgan, a Pennsylvania cheese monger, as she imagined EU bureaucrats scrutinising US cheese

labels.

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