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EU official sees possible food boycott against US

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WASHINGTON - European consumers could boycott American goods if the Bush administration challenges the legality of the EU's moratorium on genetically modified foods and drugs, an EU official said yesterday.

With US-EU ties still strained over the Iraq war, the filing of a World Trade Organization complaint could provoke a consumer backlash in Europe that "could trigger a boycott of American food products," said Tony Van der haegen, a biotech policy expert at the European Commission office in Washington.

For months, the Bush administration has left open the possibility it would initiate a WTO complaint against the EU's refusal to approve new biotech products.

Senate Finance Committee chairman Charles Grassley, an Iowa Republican, yesterday met with several Bush administration officials, urging them to immediately file the complaint.

Grassley said if no decision to file a WTO case is made within two weeks, he would try to stir up more pressure, including delivering a statement on the Senate floor. But he acknowledged he had no tools to quickly force the administration to act.

The European Commission itself has been trying to get the five-year-old moratorium lifted, arguing that 12 of 13 new biotech products have been approved by a scientific committee.

The EC worries that Europe risks losing its biotech industry without quick action. But European consumers' fears of biotech foods have also slowed lifting the moratorium. Once it is removed, new labeling and traceability standards for biotech goods could prompt a US challenge.

Speaking at an event hosted by the National Foreign Trade Council, Van der haegen said that given the fragile relations between Europe and America over Iraq and Europe's intention to lift the moratorium within a few months, it might "not be worth going to the WTO anymore."

This winter, the Bush administration appeared to be on the verge of filing the complaint, as top officials, including US Trade Representative Robert Zoellick, said their patience had run out with the EU. But as war drew near, the administration put off a decision.

The National Foreign Trade Council, comprising 400 US companies, released a report yesterday accusing the EU and some other countries of imposing burdensome standards and regulations that block imports of food, electronics, computers and a range of other goods.

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