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Visiting Korean Team Experiences California Beef Tour

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A pair of influential bloggers, a meat buyer for a major Korean retailer and five winners of a contest held in cooperation with the retailer made up a delegation from South Korea that recently experienced a checkoff-sponsored beef industry tour in California. Highlights included a chance to see the ranching operation at Yolo Land and Cattle Company near Woodland, Calif., and a hands-on evening of culinary education in the heart of California wine country.



Bloggers are an important audience as they carry great influence with Korean consumers. This group's two "power bloggers" are widely read by Korean consumers, and their coverage of the U.S. tour will greatly enhance its impact and provide very positive publicity for U.S. beef. One of these blogger's sites, on a typical day, will be visited by up to 20,000 people.

One of the visiting bloggers was also invited to the United States in 2008. When her coverage of that visit was picked up by Naver - Korea's largest search portal site - the daily viewership surged from 20,000 to more than 60,000.

The five contest winners qualified for the tour by purchasing U.S. beef from Korea's E-Mart stores in a promotion held earlier this year. They were chosen from more than 4,000 consumers who entered the contest and made a qualifying purchase. The contest began Jan. 14, just one day after E-Mart began featuring U.S. beef items in their main page advertisements.

"E-mart is the largest retailer in Korea and we had great success working with them on this promotion," says Min Park, U.S. Meat Export Federation (USMEF) Korea senior public relations manager. "Customers were very excited to have a chance to visit the United States and learn more about its beef production system, so the contest gave E-Mart exactly the kind of momentum it needed to aggressively market U.S. beef."



At the Yolo Land and Cattle Company ranch, the team got a firsthand look at an award-winning Black Angus operation that produces both purebred seedstock and a commercial cattle herd. Rancher Casey Stone led the group across much of the operation's diverse

landscape and explained many key aspects of the ranch's success – including its cattle-handling methods and marketing strategies, rotational grazing system, vegetation management plan and habitat preservation practices.

Along with his wife Angela and father Hank, a founding partner of the ranch, Stone prepared a delicious ribeye steak lunch for the group and answered many questions about managing a successful cattle operation. Yolo Land and Cattle Company is widely recognized for its conservation practices and commitment to the environment, and won the National Cattlemen's Foundation's 2007 Environmental Stewardship Award. The ranch also hosts many youth groups and educational tours, offering visitors an opportunity to learn about cattle production and rangeland management.

Observing the Stone family's commitment to raising cattle in a humane and environmentally responsible manner was an eye-opening experience for the Korean consumer team. It also made a strong impression on Sang Kyu Kim, the E-Mart meat buyer who accompanied the group.

"I am so impressed with the care these owners provide for their cattle," he said. "This is something we (Koreans) don't often get to see. But when we see this for ourselves, it gives us a very good feeling about U.S. beef."

Prior to the ranch tour, the consumer team visited Ramekins Culinary School in Sonoma, Calif. Chef Seth Thornton led the group in a hands-on cooking exercise in which they prepared a four-course meal that included a seared beef tenderloin appetizer and a main course of stuffed roasted flank steak. The menu also incorporated many fresh vegetables and cheeses produced in the area and local wine pairings. The event was a great opportunity for the team to see – and taste – the unique characteristics of high-quality U.S. beef that make for an unforgettable dining experience.

The group concluded its U.S. tour in San Francisco, visiting several retail outlets and restaurants to observe the domestic merchandising and marketing of U.S. beef. Both bloggers will be posting feature articles recapping the trip, while USMEF and E-Mart are planning to utilize the visitors' observations and experiences in support of future U.S. beef promotions.

Park noted that the tour – funded with support from the Beef Checkoff Program – is an extension of the U.S. beef industry's "To Trust" campaign, which has greatly improved the image of U.S. beef in Korea and helped regain consumer interest and confidence. She said that while some lingering doubts and misperceptions about U.S. beef remain, the industry has made great strides in this market in recent months. Recent export data show the U.S. share of Korea's imported beef market has risen above 33 percent – more than double the market share from two years ago – with the U.S. gaining significant ground on market share leader Australia.

"The campaign carries a very powerful message," says Park. "It has convinced many consumers that they had received false information about U.S. beef and that it is in fact a fine product. We are definitely seeing more interest in U.S. beef, including more positive articles and coverage in the media. So I feel U.S. beef has turned a corner in this market, and it's going to continue to get better and better."

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The Beef Checkoff Program was established as part of the 1985 Farm Bill. The checkoff assesses \$1 per head on the sale of live domestic and imported cattle, in addition to a comparable assessment on imported beef and beef products. States retain up to 50 cents on the dollar and forward the other 50 cents per head to the Cattlemen's Beef Promotion and Research Board, which administers the national checkoff program, subject to USDA approval.

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