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Thank you for your letter dated 12 October 2017 on the treatment of beef in EU-Mercosur free trade negotiations, and please accept our apologies for the delay in replying to you. You express serious concerns that Mercosur countries do not comply with EU rules related to traceability, food safety, animal welfare and environment, and you also fear that the EU could liberalise food safety standards in a future agreement. Let me reassure you unequivocally on these two points.

The Commission takes very seriously the upholding of EU sanitary and phytosanitary (SPS) standards for imported products. All products placed on the EU market, domestic and imported, have to comply with EU legislation. An agreement with Mercosur will not provide any derogation from EU food safety standards for imports from Mercosur and would not undermine the level of SPS protection or animal welfare in the EU, which are not negotiable. In addition, some Mercosur countries already cooperate with the EU on animal welfare issues and we aim, at the very least, to have a specific and detailed reference to collaboration on animal welfare in the provisions of the agreement. Moreover, the negotiation with Mercosur, will ensure reinforced cooperation on the enforcement of sanitary and phytosanitary requirements, as well as on anti-microbial resistance and thereby will strengthen the reference to EU's societal choices.

I take note of your reservations on the possible impact of those negotiations on the beef sector in Poland. I would like to reassure you that the Commission has taken and will continue to take into account the market sensitivity of the European beef industry when conducting negotiations. At the same time, beef is among the key offensive interests that have clearly been identified by Mercosur in the negotiations. It is therefore not realistic to expect Mercosur to agree to conclude a negotiation removing the steep tariff and non-tariff barriers affecting EU exports in nearly all sectors, including agriculture, without any concession by the EU. Given the concerns expressed by our farmers, in these negotiations the Commission offers commitments to provide partial access to Mercosur countries limited to tariff-rate quotas (TRQs), carefully calibrated on its volumes, in-quota duties and gradual implementation in order to prevent disturbances to the EU markets.

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We would like to point to significant potential gains in terms of increased market access for the EU food and drink industry by opening up the protected Mercosur market. But also as regards imports, access to cheaper raw materials is an important issue in this negotiation, as some Mercosur countries impose significant export tariffs on soybeans and soymeal – of which they are EU’s major suppliers. By securing better and more stable access to these inputs, we can improve the competitiveness of the EU meat sectors.

Please rest assured of our commitment to find the right balance between the need to address the concerns you have expressed and the many opportunities an ambitious free trade agreement with Mercosur will represent for the EU.

Yours sincerely,

Cecilia Malmström