

01/05/2004 Entry: "Country of Origin Labeling May Have Lessened Impact of Mad Cow Incident"

Country of Origin Labeling May Have Lessened Impact of Mad Cow Incident

By Robert Pore

robert.pore@theindependent.com

Publication Date: 01/03/04

Having a mandatory country of origin labeling law in effect may have made a difference with the recent case of BSE found in a dairy cow in Washington state when it comes to this country's foreign beef purchasers, said John Hansen, president of the Nebraska Farmers Union.

U.S. Department of Agriculture officials have traced the dairy cow's country of origin to Canada.

"It would have made a difference because we would have known that the animal in question came from Canada and it was an isolated event in that regard," Hansen said. "It probably would not have jeopardized our status as an exporter."

On Friday, the USDA announced that they have confirmed that 81 of the 82 animals listed on the Canadian health certificate that includes the eartag number of the index cow entered the United States through Oroville, Wash., on September 4, 2001.

The USDA said one of those 82 has now been located at a Mattawa, Wash. dairy operation, which is now under a state hold order. USDA said their interest in finding those cows is not because BSE can spread from cow to cow, but because it is possible they may have shared a common feed source when young.

USDA officials said that even at the height of the outbreak in the United Kingdom, it was uncommon to have more than just one or two infected cattle in the same herd.

Since the news was released on Dec. 23 that the first case of BSE or mad cow disease was found in the United States, a number of countries, such as Japan, South Korea and Mexico, have banned the importation of U.S. beef.

There was also a BSE incident in Canada last May that closed the Canada border to the U.S. when it came to meat exports.

The United States Department of Agriculture's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service announced Friday that the comment period on a proposed rule that would potentially have allowed for imports of live cattle under the age of 30 months from Canada and other countries believed to be at minimal risk of

introducing Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy (BSE) into the United States will close as originally scheduled on Jan. 5.

APHIS also announced that once the epidemiological investigation into the finding of a single case of BSE in Washington State is complete, the agency will determine the best approach to take in regard to collecting additional public comment on the proposal.

Country of origin labeling for meats, fruits, vegetables and nuts was passed as part of the 2002 Farm Bill. While the mandatory labeling law is supposed to go into effect on Sept. 30 of this year, a handful of House and Senate appropriators want to delay the implementation of the law until 2006.

Greg Ruehle, executive vice president of the Nebraska Cattlemen's Association, said there are a lot of reasons why the nation needs country of origin labeling law, but the law included in the 2002 Farm Bill is not the version needed to help consumers and producers.

"What we have in front of us today from the 2002 Farm Bill is not workable and there is a concerted effort from groups, such as ours, to fix the law and create a workable program that benefits producers and consumers alike," Ruehle said.

One of the main complaints by those opposed to country of origin labeling is the cost associated with it to producers and the industry alike.

Now that U.S. Agriculture Secretary Ann Veneman has announced that the USDA will implement a national animal identification program, Ruehle said country of origin labeling law is needed to complement it.

"We have to have animal ID to do it right and that would let us identify the animal first, and then establish a system for tracking that product as it goes through," he said.

But until a more workable country of origin law is written, the law that was passed as part of the 2002 Farm Bill has to be delayed until a new bill is written, Ruehle said.

"The only way COOL is workable and only way this system establishes itself in a meaningful way to benefit the consumers is that it has to start with an element of animal ID that compliments some form of labeling at retailing," he said. "That is not the program that folks pushed through in the 2002 Farm Bill. That has to be made abundantly clear because we need to have something that works."

The Lincoln-based Organization for Competitive Markets (OMC) said that USDA's proposals for the beef markets are insufficient to rapidly regain export

markets because they do not guarantee meat from countries that are free of BSE.

"Animal identification and tracking may be good ideas, but they do not result in marketable boxes of beef that are guaranteed to come from the U.S. as a BSE free country," said Fred Stokes, OCM president. "The Japanese and South Koreans asked for meat labeled born, raised and slaughtered in the United States. Even with a full traceback system, we do not have any beef that guarantees all meat within it is from a BSE-free country."

Stokes said the USDA in the past has opposed country of origin labeling and wants a so-called 'North American solution' to the crisis.

"However, the global rules that are currently in effect are country specific, not farm or animal specific, with regard to BSE-free status," he said.

Stokes said the Terrestrial Animal Health Code propounded by the Office of International Epizootics (OIE) is clear that the U.S. is a BSE-free country because the diseased cow came from Canada.

"Unfortunately, Canada is not BSE-free," he said. "The U.S. cannot guarantee Japan and South Korea BSE-free beef without country of origin labeling for export purposes. A mandatory animal identification system will not change this fact."

The OCM is estimating that the lack of country of origin labeling is currently costing cattle producers over \$27 million per day in lost revenue and an estimated \$15 billion in lost equity following the report of BSE in this country.

Nebraska Farmers Union President John Hansen said with the uncertainty surrounding COOL, he and other Farmers Union members from Nebraska and across the country are having a "fly-in" to the nation's capitol on Jan. 19-20 to lobby lawmakers to support COOL.

"It is increasingly difficult for opponents of country of origin labeling in view of Secretary Veneman's announcement the other day that a positive livestock ID system is going to be implemented, that we can somehow have a farm of origin identification and labeling system, but we can't have a country of origin labeling system," Hansen said.

Hansen said in the case of a positive animal ID system, it is less than clear that in the absence of a BSE-type disease outbreak where producers will benefit economically compared to a country of origin labeling law that advertises that a product is born, bred and raised in the United States.

"At least in the case of country of origin labeling, there is a real opportunity for producers to receive an economic benefit and that is exactly why packers are opposed to it because it is likely that the packers won't be as able to camouflage their imported meat products to U.S. consumers," he said.

"I think this whole BSE outbreak will do nothing but strengthen consumer's desire to know more about the products that they are buying and labeling is part of the consumer's right to know."

OMC president Stokes also said that the USDA has insisted there was no benefit to COOL and opposed it vigorously.

"This mad cow incident shows that there are tremendous benefits," he said. "If we were able to guarantee that the boxes of beef with USA labels do not have meat from other countries within them, our export markets are likely to have been maintained. The cost of implementing COOL would have been, and will be, returned many times over in value added for U.S. beef. We hope that USDA will add their support to country of origin labeling for our export customers and our domestic consumers."