

12/01/2003 Entry: "Consumers Are Not Served by Congressional Decision on COOL"

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The United States Congress agreed last week to delay the implementation of most Country of Origin Labeling (COOL) regulations for two years, bowing to pressure applied by the Bush administration and many segments of the food industry, which maintained that complying with the rules would have cost billions of dollars and would have translated into higher consumer costs.

However, an analysis of the decision suggests that this was a decision dictated by political expediency, not any concern for what consumers want and need.

For example, the delay applies to meats, produce and farm-raised fish - but not to wild fish, which will see no such delay. The reason? Politics. Sen. Thad Cochran, R-Miss., favored the delays because his home state has a major catfish farming industry, and the new labels were perceived as raising prices without benefit. Wild fish, on the other hand, are believed to benefit from the labeling - which is why Senate Appropriations Committee Chairman Ted Stevens, R-Alaska, favored the regulations. Alaska, after all, is a major source of wild salmon.

The new COOL regulations were created by the 2002 farm bill, though the House of Representatives last summer voted to block their implementation. The Senate had, until now, not shared that opinion. Senate Minority Leader Tom Daschle (D-South Dakota) accused the Bush administration of delaying implementation until after the 2004 presidential election because it did not want to alienate business and knew that consumers want better labeling of food products.

Quite frankly, we're not sure that Sen. Daschle's motives are any less political than any other senator's. But that doesn't change the fact that this issue is one over which consumers need to educate themselves and then rise up and make their voices heard.

We've had a lot of communications from people within the food industry since the Senate vote, and virtually all of them believe that we are making a mountain out of a molehill on this issue.

"I have been in the retail supermarket business for over 50 years," wrote one man from the meat industry, "and I have seen few customers who are as concerned about what country their food comes from as some would indicate."

Another executive told us that this is a marketing issue, not a food safety/food security issue. "Any manufacturer or retailer that believes they can create a competitive advantage by identifying the origin of their meat and vegetables has always had the ability to do so," he told us. "Maybe they haven't because their consumers have never indicated that this is something about which they have particularly strong feelings."

Another executive said, "Consumers say they are much more concerned with things like produce quality and availability. Hence, my prediction is that groups with a trade-protectionist agenda will wail, and a few of the left leaning "consumer groups" will cry foul, but the response from consumers at large is likely to be a huge, collective yawn."

And finally, yet another food industry executive said, "I would like to see some hard, reliable data that shows consumers are interested in COOL. I also would be interested to know what consumers think they are getting by having this information on the label...better food?, more protection from bioterrorist attacks?, assurance that they are only buying from within the U.S.?....I could challenge all of these and so could many of my peers."

Well, as for data we have look no farther than our own SupermarketGuru.com Quick Poll, which we conducted during the Canadian mad cow disease scare earlier this year. We believe that concerns about Canadian beef highlighted the argument that consumers need to know where the products they eat are coming from. SupermarketGuru.com user agreed. When we asked them if Canadian beef should be labeled as such once the current ban is lifted, 93 percent of respondents said that it should be labeled. Fifty-eight percent of respondents said they "have the right" to country of origin information, and a majority said that they would not expect to pay more if products are labeled by country of origin and that the cost of such labeling should be absorbed by manufacturers and retailers.

Only seven percent of respondents said that country-of-origin labeling would have no impact on their buying decisions. Now, politicians and businessmen can argue about cost and program implementation and ultimate responsibility all they want. They can seek refuse in surveys that are slanted to reassure consumers that there is no need for COOL regulations.

But ultimately, we believe that in a time of great vulnerability, COOL regulations make simple sense as a matter of security and reassurance to a skittish consumer population. And consumers need to make this known to the

people who represent them in Washington and to the stores where they shop in their neighborhoods.