

11/24/2003 Entry: "Daschle Says Administration Seeks To Kill Labeling Law"

Amid a decision by Republican conferees on the FY04 omnibus appropriations bill to delay implementation of mandatory country-of-origin labeling for certain farm products except wild salmon, Senate Minority Leader Daschle is accusing the Bush administration of planning to repeal the program. "Let there be no mistake about what this proposed delay means," Daschle said in a statement late Friday. "It means the Bush administration wants to kill the [country-of-origin] law, they just don't want to do it before the presidential election because they know the majority of people in our nation want labeling." Daschle noted that the Senate voted 58-36 earlier this year for a "sense of the Senate" resolution to reject a House proposal that would have stopped implementation of labeling for red meat. Daschle cited reports that the omnibus will delay the labeling program for two years rather than one and broadens the delay beyond red meat to peanuts, fresh fruits and vegetables and seafood except wild salmon. Daschle added that Democrats had no involvement in the decision and said: "There is simply no reasonable justification for this action. This may be a win for the Bush administration and the meatpacking cartel, but the people are losing on this one." A Senate Democratic aide said the Bush administration's opposition to labeling had helped Sen. Tim Johnson, D-S.D., win re-election last year and predicted that the administration's continuing opposition would help Democrats in next year's elections in many states, including South Dakota, where Daschle faces re-election. The Utah Agricultural Advisory Board, a state agency that includes representatives of the Utah Farm Bureau and Utah Farmers Union, appealed to Senate Agriculture Appropriations Subcommittee Chairman Robert Bennett, R-Utah, to support the labeling program "for the sake of the producers of the State of Utah and the United States."

A top lobbyist for the Food Marketing Institute, which had asked Congress to repeal the labeling law, was cautious today in reacting to the proposed deal. Noting that he has not seen the legislative language, FMI Vice President John Motley said if the deal is "as reported," FMI is "very pleased. This gives us time to sit down with the producer groups and say, 'Is there an easier way to do this?'" He said the two year delay "is not the answer. This is just a recognition this law is very difficult to implement." -- by Jerry Hagstrom