

06/18/2003 Entry: "HOUSE COMMITTEE VOTES TO DELAY MANDATORY COOL"

The House Appropriations subcommittee on agriculture votes to block funding for mandatory country-of-origin labeling (COOL) for beef and other meats. The vote came as markup began Tuesday on the fiscal 2004 Ag Appropriations bill. The subcommittee under chairman Henry Bonilla, R-Texas, voted that none of the funds in the bill shall be used for implanting mandatory COOL. This effectively delays implementation of mandatory COOL for one year to Sept 30, 2005. The funds cutoff would apply to all meat products affected by COOL but not seafood, peanuts and fresh produce.

The delay will give lawmakers and USDA ample time to sort out objections to the labels by retailers, meatpackers and some livestock producers, says Bonilla. He acted on the "controversial, difficult" issue because the House Agriculture Committee wants to review the law, he says. It's essential that it provide time for Congress to properly evaluate this issue. "We will not jump blindly. We must consider all implications and make an educated decision," he says. At the same time, the chairman of the House Ag Committee, Bob Goodlatte, R-Va., announced a June 24 hearing on COOL.

Reaction to the vote was immediate. Recent discussions have brought to light serious concerns about the COOL, says Bryan Dierlam, NCBA's director of legislative affairs. NCBA strongly agrees that Rep. Bonilla's actions will stop the freight train of heated rhetoric out there and start a realistic debate, in front of Congress, about mandatory labeling. The Texas and Southwestern Cattle Raisers Association (TSCRA) and the Texas Cattle Feeders Association (TCFA) praised the actions in a joint statement. This law was adopted as part of the 2002 Farm Bill without adequate debate on cost and benefits, they say. Given the burdensome costs that will be associated with COOL, going forward with COOL at this time is premature. The long-term implications of mandatory COOL are too important to be considered anywhere other than through a full Congressional debate, they say.

However, House Rep. Marcy Kaptur, D-Ohio, says she intends to argue at the full committee level for letting USDA proceed with writing rules for mandatory labeling. The Appropriations Committee is expected to vote on agriculture funding next week. Consumers have the right to know where their food is coming from, she says.