

04/08/2003 Entry: "LMA, R-CALF USA urge producers to ignore 'misinformation' about COOL"

Livestock producers must resist the onslaught of misinformation aimed at weakening their support for country of origin labeling (COOL), say Livestock Marketing Association and R-CALF USA.

That misinformation includes packers demanding that producers initiate a recordkeeping system and third-party audits to verify the origin of their livestock; and wildly exaggerated estimates of the cost of complying with COOL.

LMA and R-CALF said producers should keep these facts in mind:

- About the current status of COOL: It is voluntary, until the fall of 2004. And currently, there is no known retailer who has requested an origin label, under the voluntary guidelines.
- About recordkeeping demands: There are NO rules available from the U.S. Department of Agriculture on how mandatory COOL will be implemented at the farm/ranch, feedlot or livestock market. That means that demands made by packers, or anyone else at this point, are strictly their own and do not have the force or effect of law or regulation.
- About producer recordkeeping: Most producers will already have production and sales records that show their livestock was born and raised in the U.S., or a foreign country, if that is the case.
- Producers should also remember that 1) COOL specifically prohibits USDA from using a mandatory identification system for purposes of verifying the country of origin of a covered commodity; 2) Over 90% of U.S. producers do not import or handle foreign cattle; and 3) USDA's own Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) has already reported, "there are labeling practices now in use that could serve as...models for (COOL)...systems have already been put in place by slaughter plants to accommodate such certification programs."
- About so-called "unmarketable" livestock: Opponents of COOL are alleging that without "auditable records" on livestock born prior to the mandatory COOL, these animals will be unmarketable, or marketed at heavily discounted prices. This is a ridiculous allegation. No one at the federal level has indicated anything resembling this scenario is likely to occur.
- Furthermore, it is unimaginable that USDA or this industry would allow millions of animals to become unmarketable, or of lesser value, simply because they were born before implementation of mandatory COOL.

· About the cost of complying with COOL: USDA's initial \$2 billion estimate has too many flaws in it, to be covered briefly. These include: USDA assumed there are currently no product tracking mechanisms in place for processors, wholesalers, etc.; this estimate was prepared only after consulting with opponents of COOL; the estimate included all two million farmers and ranchers in the U.S., without considering that many of these operations do not raise the commodities covered under COOL.

“It is unfortunate that the opponents of COOL are spending more time talking about why COOL cannot work than helping USDA and livestock producers figure out how it can work,” said LMA President Billy Perrin. “If producers stay united behind COOL we can make this program work to the benefit of the livestock industry and consumers,” pledged Leo McDonnell, R-CALF president.

Officials of LMA and R-CALF pledged they will continue working with USDA, and the industry, to develop effective, workable and affordable methods to implement COOL.