

03/14/2003 Entry: "Letter to the Editor"

The subject of Country of Origin Labeling has become an in-house debate in the production agriculture industry. Groups in the National Cattlemen's Association camp, including the Missouri Cattlemen's Association, have taken a position for voluntary Country of Origin Labeling. Groups in the R-Calf USA (United Stockgrowers of America) camp, including the Missouri Stockgrower's Association, have taken a position supporting the mandatory Country of Origin Labeling law included in the 2002 Farm Bill. Voluntary Country of Origin Labeling has been available to the packing industry since the 1970's. Although 49 packing companies supply meat to the school lunch program, which requires that only US meat be supplied, none of those 49 packing companies has participated in the voluntary Country of Origin Labeling program. Twenty two (22%) percent of ground beef in the US is manufactured from imported meat. For the year 2002, the US imported 200 million dollars more meat than the US exported. Since we primarily import low quality, commodity red meat, our trade deficit in pounds of meat is much greater. Packing companies, jerky manufacturers, and processed food manufacturers have been purchasing foreign meat, in three cases, from countries with known Bovine Spongiform Encephalitis infected cattle, and mixing it with US beef. These companies can purchase this commodity meat, which is in direct competition with our slaughter cow and bull markets, for 45 to 75 cents per pound. Neck trim meat is priced today, March 11, 2003, at \$1.35 cents per pound (wholesale price in Springfield, Missouri). Packing companies are currently purchasing the cheaper foreign commodity meat, mixing that meat with our US beef trimmings, and then selling the manufactured product disguised as US beef. The cost savings to the manufacturer is a matter of simple arithmetic

North Carolina State University conducted a recent research study in which they surveyed nearly 1000 meat consumers. Nearly 76% of the consumers surveyed indicated a desire to purchase meat that is labeled as to country of origin. Sixty-eight percent (68%) of those surveyed said they would pay more for food known to have been grown or produced in the USA. A full 50% of those surveyed said they would not knowingly buy meat produced from animals raised in other countries. Only 21% of respondents would buy meat from animals raised in South America. Seventy nine percent (79%) of those surveyed said they think food produced by United States producers is safer than imported foods. Respondents to the survey made it quite plain: If given the opportunity, consumers in the US will support US farmers and ranchers. The meat packers are aware of the results of this survey and many others that have yielded similar results, yet they still refuse to participate in a voluntary Country of Origin Labeling program. They simply make too much money selling an uninformed consumer meat from a foreign country. The consumer is left in the dark as to what he or she is consuming. As a result, the market place is less competitive and the American beef producer receives less than the fair market value for slaughter cows and bulls. There is also a negative impact on the market ready steer and heifer prices due to a ground beef market place that is obscured by the pounds

and pounds of imported commodity meat brought into the US for grinding purposes. The meat packing industry, many in the beef jerky business, and many companies processing meats for canning and soups are making too much money selling foreign meat into the market place disguised as US meat. For this simple reason, a market driven approach to Country of Origin Labeling will not be successful. To support voluntary Country of Origin Labeling is to support no Country of Origin Labeling.

The Country of Origin Labeling portion of the 2002 Farm Bill is now the law of the land. An Act of Congress has been signed by the President of the United States that requires foreign meat to be identified for the US consumer. The Country of Origin Labeling law is simply written and easy to understand. The law expressly prevents the USDA from requiring a mandatory identification system to verify the country of origin of meat. The rumors currently circulating about the necessity for mandatory identification of each calf down to the farm of origin and the need for a third party to verify ownership of a calf is calculated misinformation. There is no wording in either the Act or the Country of Origin Labeling portion of the Farm Bill that would imply the need for mandatory identification of calves or third party verification of ownership.

The 49 packing firms providing meat to the school lunch program and adult nutrition programs run by the government must, by law, supply only US meat. The identification of US meat is a simple process and without bureaucratic hassle. The Country of Origin Labeling law lists four other simple programs that are currently operating in the United States that could be utilized to identify country of origin labeled meat. All five of these suggested processes are approved by the USDA and are in operation at the present time. Any one of these five processes could be utilized to implement Country of Origin Labeling.

The United States Department of Agriculture seems to be making an attempt to undermine or sabotage the Country of Origin Labeling law. The Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS) has been given the responsibility of enforcing the Country of Origin Labeling portion of the 2002 Farm Bill. Unfortunately, the AMS is releasing misleading and contradictory information. One interview with officials from the AMS will state mandatory verification down to the animal of origin is part of the Country of Origin Labeling law. The next interview will state mandatory verification will not be required. One interview with AMS officials will state packers can require third party verification before accepting cattle for slaughter. The next interview will state packers do not have the authority to require third party verification. I believe these contradictory statements are an attempt to make producers so confused and disillusioned about Country of Origin Labeling that they will ask legislators to repeal the mandatory portion of Country of Origin Labeling. What the USDA is doing is unethical and reprehensible. It is the USDA's responsibility to implement the Country of Origin Labeling law as it is written by Congress, not as they intend to alter the law. I would encourage all concerned producers to write their US Representatives and Senators, requesting

they contact the USDA and demand the Country of Origin Labeling law be implemented as it is written and as it was intended by the United States Congress.

In summary, the Country of Origin Labeling law is simply written, contains numerous suggestions for implementation, and should not place unnecessary or onerous demands upon producers. Systems of identification and verification are already in place and are utilized daily by the meat packing industry. Letters written to producers from meat packing firms demanding third party verification of calf ownership are improper and violate the Packers and Stockyards Act. R-Calf USA has filed a complaint with the USDA revealing the scare tactic attempts utilized by numerous meat packing firms in their efforts to undermine the Country of Origin Labeling law. Please refer to the R-Calf web address (www.r-calfusa.com) for a list of Country of Origin Labeling Myths and Facts. This list will help producers clarify just what Country of Origin Labeling is all about.

Wythe Willey, the immediate past president of the National Cattlemen's Association, is quoted in the March 1st issue of the Iowa Farmer magazine. "The consumer is king when it comes to paying the bills, so it is necessary cattle producers produce what consumers want." I agree with Mr. Willey. Let us indeed give the consumer what he or she wants: Let's give them wholesome, safe, and disease free beef, pork, and lamb born, raised, and prepared for consumption in the United States of America. Buy US Beef!!!

Sincerely,

R. M. Thornsberry, D.V.M.
President
Missouri Stockgrower's Association

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