01/05/2004 Entry: "Meat Label Program May Get a Boost"

Meat Label Program May Get a Boost

Mad cow scare could renew support for listing the country of origin

By Faith Bremner / Gannett News Service

E.B. McGovern / Associated Press

All 460 bull calves will be killed at a Mabton, Wash., ranch where a calf born to a Holstein was found to be infected with mad cow disease.

WASHINGTON — A federal program that's supposed to require retailers to tell customers where their meat comes from could get a big boost from the mad cow scare, program supporters say.

Before leaving town for Christmas break, Congress was set to approve legislation that would stall the U.S. Department of Agriculture's country-of-origin labeling program until Sept. 2006.

The House approved the delay as part of a mammoth bill to finance federal agencies, and the Senate likely will vote on the measure Jan. 20.

Now program supporters hope the discovery last week in Washington state of a cow infected with bovine spongiform encephalopathy will renew support for the beleaguered program, which would let consumers know whether their beef, lamb, pork, fish, produce and peanuts come from the United States or elsewhere.

The 6-year-old diseased cow apparently was born and raised in Canada and moved to the United States two years ago. About 10 percent of the nation's beef comes from other countries, primarily from Canada, Mexico and Australia.

The National Cattlemen's Beef Association, heavily influenced by the meatpacking industry, and groups representing supermarket chains have been fighting the mandatory-labeling program that was included in the 2002 farm bill.

Supporters include consumer organizations and farm groups representing producers who believe the made-in-America label will give them a leg up in the marketplace.

"A lot of things have changed in the last week," said Tom Buis, vice president of government relations for the National Farmers Union, which supports mandatory labeling.

“We’re bringing producers to town before the vote in the Senate. We’re going to put on a full-court press.”

But program critics say mandatory labeling would not have helped the USDA detect the infected cow any sooner or stop it from entering the food supply.

The National Cattlemen’s Beef Association says the program will create too much paperwork and cost too much. An organization spokesman said the public is not clamoring for the program and it is losing support.

“Country-of-origin labeling has nothing to do with food safety; it has everything to do with food marketing,” said Jay Truitt, the beef association’s executive director of legislative affairs. “If beef is not safe, it shouldn’t be in the country anyway.”

Consumers have a right to know where their meat is coming from and what the risk of eating it is, said Jean Halloran, spokeswoman for Consumers Union that publishes Consumer Reports magazine.

For example, European countries test all their slaughtered cattle for mad cow disease — at a cost of $30 to $40 an animal — and their beef may be safer than beef produced in the United States, she said.

Last year, the USDA tested only 1 out of 5,000 animals, she said.

“Consumers have a right to determine what they’re eating,” Halloran said. “This is one of the pieces of information they deserve to know.”

Program supporters say a new animal identification program the USDA is developing now will bear much of the paperwork burden and cost of carrying out a meat-labeling program.

Work on the identification program started more than a year ago to enable the beef industry by 2005 to track animals infected with ailments like mad cow, brucellosis and foot-and-mouth disease. Cattle would be tracked from the ranch to the slaughterhouse using radio-frequency identification tags.