

06/24/2003 Entry: "R-CALF USA Conducts COOL Briefings for Congressional Staff"

(Washington DC) "The COOL [country of origin labeling] law is well written and pro-competitive but USDA continues to erect imaginary barriers designed to obstruct COOL's chances for fair implementation," Bill Bullard, C.E.O. of R-CALF United Stockgrowers of America (R-CALF USA) told Congressional staffers during the COOL Briefing Sessions held in Washington, D.C., last week.

United States Senators Charles Grassley (R-IA), Tim Johnson (D-SD), Mike Enzi (R-WY), Bob Graham (D-FL), and Tom Harkin (D-IA) sponsored the COOL Briefing Sessions to provide congressional agricultural staffers with a forum for learning how COOL can be implemented in a least-cost and efficient manner. R-CALF USA, Consumers Federation of America, American Farm Bureau Federation, National Farmers Union, Organization for Competitive Markets, and the Florida Department of Agriculture were the organizations invited to conduct the sessions. Approximately 65 Senate staffers and 30 House staffers attended the two day sessions.

"COOL reduces the dominant market control enjoyed by packers, retailers, and USDA, and redistributes this control among all market participants; particularly consumers and farm and ranch producers," Bullard said. "The COOL law is necessary to restore the revered principle embodied within our free enterprise system - open and fair competition."

Bullard outlined several unfounded and unsupported claims USDA is using to make COOL implementation appear unnecessarily complicated, including the claim that marking only imported livestock violates "national treatment" requirements of existing trade agreements. Bullard said USDA already verifies the origin of meat used in the National School Lunch Program using an import marking system. "USDA administers this labeling program without imposing a single record keeping burden on producers and without violating any trade agreements," he said. Bullard said the most onerous action of the USDA is its attempt to delegate authority to packers and retailers, authorizing them to impose COOL related conditions upon U.S. farmers and ranchers. "It is USDA, not Congress, who gave the packers the incentive to threaten producers with third-party verifications, company audits, and packer indemnification."

"We urge Congressional members to immediately investigate whether the concerns of U.S. independent producers are valid," Bullard stated. "It appears USDA is attempting to compensate the packers' and retailers' lost control over the marketplace with a new form of control over producers themselves." Bullard urged congressional staffers to encourage their Members to demand that USDA quit working to undermine COOL and begin implementing COOL in accordance with the recommendations of R-CALF USA and the many other groups that have provided constructive comments to the agency.

R-CALF USA, the Ranchers-Cattlemen Action Legal Fund, United Stockgrowers of America is a national, non-profit cattle association representing cattle producers in the areas of trade and marketing. R-CALF USA has 8,700 individual members in 43 states and more than 46 affiliated local and state cattle and farm organizations. For more information, visit www.r-calfusa.com or call 406-252-2516.