

06/18/2003 Entry: "Reactions to Approps. COOL Vote"

WASHINGTON (DTN) -- Reaction to the House Agriculture Appropriations Subcommittee's action Tuesday to stop the Agriculture Department from implementing country of origin labeling on meat was predictable today, with the National Cattlemen's Beef Association and the National Pork Producers Council praising the action and R-CALF USA and the National Farmers Union denouncing it.

There were also rumors that if the measure remains in the fiscal year 2004 appropriations bill as it proceeds through Congress it could produce a frenzy of amendments some agricultural groups may hate such as payment limitations and on the size of livestock operations that can get Environmental Quality Incentives payments. A House Democratic staffer said the measure came as a surprise because the Republican majority gave the Democratic members of the committee only four hours to examine the bill before the vote on it.

At the same time, there is also concern about letters from the Japanese government to the Agriculture Department demanding assurances that meat from the United States is from the United States, not Canada since Japan has banned meat from Canada.

"It's essential that we provide time for Congress to properly evaluate this issue. We will not jump blindly -- we must consider all implications and make an educated decision," House Agriculture Appropriations Subcommittee Chairman Henry Bonilla, R-Texas, said, according to a statement from NCBA. "That is exactly what my Subcommittee intends to do and I am thankful that the House Agriculture Committee shares our concerns and has decided to hold hearings on it."

The NCBA praised Bonilla for including the provision that would stop anyone at the Agriculture Department from getting paid to implement the country of origin rule and House Agriculture Committee Chairman Bob Goodlatte, R-Va., for scheduling a hearing on country of origin next week.

"Recent discussions have brought to light serious concerns about the Country of Origin labeling law in the 2002 Farm Bill," said NCBA lobbyist Bryan Dierlam. "We strongly agree 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. These two decisive actions today indicate that additional debate, dialogue and fact finding on country-of-origin labeling will continue." After all the listening sessions and innuendo, we can finally bring this debate to Congress. The long-term implications of mandatory labeling are too important to be considered anywhere else."

Dierlam added, "We commend Chairman Bonilla for his willingness to address this head on. Frustration abounds on all sides of the country of origin labeling issue. These new actions will help producers, USDA, policymakers and the public come to some resolution without putting the financial future of producers at risk," explains Dierlam.

National Pork Producers Council President Jon Caspers of Swaledale, Iowa, also commended Goodlatte's and Bonilla's actions. Caspers said, "We commend today's aggressive actions by both House Agriculture subcommittees....These congressional actions will shed light on the myriad issues and concerns, which have surfaced during the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) COOL Listening Sessions, in numerous economic studies, news reports and new producer and industry requirements for COOL compliance."

Caspers said he has been asked to testify on behalf of America's pork producers at the hearing next week. "We've studied it extensively and the facts show that COOL is all about added costs with no real benefits to America's pork producers," Caspers said, adding NPPC has long opposed COOL because the group believes it will not raise hog prices long-term, will end eleven record-setting years for U.S. pork exports, causing pork exports to plummet between 2004 and 2011, and dramatically affect the competitiveness of U.S. pork in world markets.

But R-CALF USA said, Bonilla had "caved in" to the larger meat producers and processors. "The more concentrated segments of the cattle feeding, meat packing industry, and beef industry groups, in a furtive attempt to derail country of origin labeling (COOL) by any means necessary, has railroaded through the House Agriculture Appropriations Sub-Committee legislation to eliminate funding for the implementation of COOL."

R-CALF USA Region V Director Chuck Kiker of Beaumont, Texas, said, "I am gravely disappointed in the House Ag Appropriations Sub-Committee. So many tactics have been attempted to shoot down COOL, from manipulating data to misrepresentations of the laws in place to outright deception. Rep. Bonilla has sold out the cow-calf producers, not only in Texas, but producers across the U.S., as well as our customers who are most responsible for the passage of the law."

Kiker added, ""Emotions are running high due to BSE being found in Canada. Two of our major beef customers abroad - Korea and Japan - are demanding U.S. beef be born, raised, and processed in the U.S.A. Bonilla's act has the potential to undermine the integrity and confidence between U.S. producers and our most important resource, domestic and international consumers," said Kiker.

R-CALF USA is on the agenda to testify at the June 24 hearing. "The fact COOL was passed and continues to engender strong support testifies to our nation's desire for this law," said R-CALF USA President Leo McDonnell. "This attempt to

delay and repeal COOL comes as no surprise. The opposing beef industry groups have been showing their cards for quite some time. They are hoping U.S. cattle producers will roll over. Instead, I suggest you step forward, call your U.S. Representatives, and join R-CALF USA in restoring a voice for the U.S. cattle industry."

The National Farmers Union expressed "grave concern" about the appropriations measure prohibiting the Agriculture secretary continuing writing rules for mandatory country-of-origin labeling of meats.

NFU President Dave Frederickson said, "It is unconceivable that this would be attempted at a time of heightened concerns from America's consumers and trading partners about the origin of our meat. Country-of-origin labeling is about educating consumers and providing opportunities for producers to promote their high quality products."

Jerry Hagstrom
DTN Political Correspondent