

03/14/2003 Entry: "USDA Will Conduct Country-of-Origin Labeling Hearings"

Mar. 11--The U.S. Department of Agriculture will host hearings on country-of-origin labeling at sites around the country in order to gather more input from the public.

"Listening and education sessions" are planned for a number of states, including California, Florida, Minnesota, Missouri and Nebraska, so far. Specific sites and dates have not yet been set, said Adam Neilsen, spokesman for the Illinois Farm Bureau.

Few issues are more divisive on the agricultural front right now than country-of-origin labeling.

While producers and ranchers applaud the farm bill's inclusion of mandatory labeling as a way to sell "raised in the USA" product to consumers, meatpacker and processor industry opposition has mounted over the cost of the program and changes that could be forced on the industry.

Making country-of-origin labeling mandatory by the fall of 2004 requires that some kind of tracking mechanism be in place "for calves that are dropping now," said Marilee Johnson, spokeswoman for the Illinois Beef Association in Springfield.

"We're saddled with trying to track those animals through the system," she said, noting the federal government hasn't provided a program on how to implement a labeling program.

Labeling will be "cumbersome because of grinds," said Johnson, referring to the industry's practice of producing ground beef from a wide variety of sources.

Johnson said the Illinois beef group prefers a voluntary program. "If we adopt mandatory labeling, our trading partners will do the same to us," she said.

Some see the labeling question as more than just an identification program.

"The passage of COOL could break the total strangehold that agribusiness has on the food chain. That's why they are trying to put it down," said Fred Stokes, executive director of the Organization for Competitive Markets, a Lincoln, Neb.-based advocacy group that seeks increased competition in the agricultural marketplace.

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