

Editorial: U.S. should get COOL

Cap Times editorial, Jan. 17, 2007

The new Congress has many demands on it, some of them complex and challenging. But one of the most important steps that this Congress can take is an exceptionally easy, and exceptionally popular, one.

In 2002, Congress overwhelmingly enacted Country of Origin Labeling (COOL) legislation, which requires retailers to inform consumers about which country produced their beef, pork, lamb, produce, peanuts and seafood. For a variety of reasons ranging from concerns about health standards to a desire to "buy local" and encourage sustainable development the legislation had strong appeal.

So why aren't most foods labeled according to COOL standards?

The food industry did not want to be honest with the American people. Working with their Republican allies in key congressional positions, industry lobbyists succeeded in blocking COOL

With Democrats such as Iowa Sen. Tom Harkin and Wisconsin Rep. Dave Obey taking over the chairmanships of the Senate Agriculture Committee and the House Appropriations Committee, respectively, a coalition of organizations that include the National Farmers Union, as well as the Consumer Federation of America, the National Consumers League and other groups, has written a letter urging the newly empowered committee chairmen to move rapidly to provide the Department of Agriculture with implementation funds and to require the department to immediately prepare a plan for implementing mandatory country-of-origin labeling.

It is time to get this done.

Tell Congress: It's no longer cool to stall COOL

Great Falls Tribune, MT - Jan 11, 2007

It's actually almost funny, the way even an "act of Congress" has been foiled by special interests with the blessings of the Bush administration.

Despite passing a mandate five years ago for country-of-origin labeling of foodstuffs, and over the protests of Montana's congressional delegation, implementation of the legislation has been delayed and bureaucratized by a few industries and sympathetic lawmakers until fall of 2008.

But like the cat in the children's song who "wouldn't go away," the Montana delegation keeps coming back, trying to get COOL enacted.

We applaud — but don't hold our breath — for the latest bipartisan effort, which has Montana Republican Rep. Denny Rehberg and Democratic Sen. Max Baucus making yet another push to get COOL implemented next fall instead of a year later.

Rehberg said this week he is introducing a bill in the House to move up mandatory labeling to next September. At the same time, Baucus said he figures to be chairman of a subcommittee with jurisdiction over the issue.

"Special interest groups" — mostly the highly centralized food processing and distribution industries — "have been blocking COOL for too long," Rehberg said. "Montana consumers deserve the right to know where their meat products are coming from, and we need to let them know this as soon as possible."

Baucus, in announcing his probable chairmanship of the Senate subcommittee on Marketing, Inspection and Product Promotion, said: "COOL is very important to our producers and I am committed to making sure COOL is mandatory and fully implemented."

In addition to being useful information for consumers, many in Montana's livestock industry believe domestic, if not Montana-grown, beef would be preferred by American consumers if they were given the option of choosing.

And as has been pointed out many times, Americans today know more about the origins of their car parts, clothing and electronic equipment than they know about their food.

Our delegation already is on board with COOL; it wouldn't hurt, however, to tell others in Congress to stop procrastinating on this basic consumer issue.

COOL should be implemented sooner, not later

Aberdeen American News, SD - Jan 30, 2007

Hurrah for the senators - led by Sens. Max Baucus, D-Mont., Craig Thomas, R-Wyo. and our own John Thune - who are sponsoring legislation to move the deadline for implementing country-of-origin labeling to Sept. 30 - one year ahead of the current deadline.

Sen. Thune said in a release, "This delay hurts South Dakota's cattle producers and treats consumers with disdain. I will continue to work with my colleagues who support mandatory COOL to fight this delay and secure an earlier implementation date."

As well they should.

Country-of-origin labeling was originally included in the 2002 farm bill and was set to go into effect on Sept. 30, 2004, for beef, lamb, pork, fish, fruits and vegetables. That "deadline" was never met because Congress has pushed back the deadline for all products in the bill except seafood over and over and over again.

Here, in general, is how COOL would work: When implemented, only meat from animals born, raised and slaughtered in the United States would be eligible for USDA's "U.S. Meat" label.

Right now if beef from any foreign country is held in the United States for the prescribed number of hours before it is slaughtered, it can carry the USDA seal.

While imported beef slaughtered in the United States can still carry a USDA seal after the new rule goes into effect, it must also list the country of origin.

That only makes sense, and, according to a 2003 Colorado State University study, consumers are willing to pay for it. That study, which involved 300 people in Chicago and Denver, showed that more than 70 percent would be willing to pay more for steak and hamburger and 75 percent wanted their meat labeled by country of origin.

Additionally, results of a poll released in January 2004 showed that 81 percent of Americans think that food should be labeled with country-of-origin information. The poll, conducted by Penn, Schoen & Berlkand Associates Inc., an Internet survey group, was done for the National Farmers Union.

News reports over the years have also indicated that producers are very supportive of the mandatory food-labeling law because they see it as an incredible marketing tool, it would give consumers more information and give them first choice of U.S. beef.

However, many supermarkets and meatpackers don't like it. They say COOL would require too much paperwork and implementing it would be too expensive.

Sometimes - and this is one of those times - extra effort and extra investment are more than worth it.

In an era where threat of Mad Cow disease is very much alive and well, consumers deserve to know from where their meat comes. After all the precautions taken by the United States to protect its citizens and livestock from the impending BSE threat in Canada, it just makes sense to label meat with its country of origin.

As Sen. Thomas aptly pointed out, many products - such as clothing - already have country-of-origin labels. "If it is good enough for T-shirts, it is good enough for T-bones," he said.

He couldn't be more correct.

Bravo to the senators for being proactive in pushing for a more timely implementation date for COOL.