

United States Senate

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August 4, 2006

The Honorable Mike Johanns
United States Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Ave., S.W.
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Secretary Johanns:

As you well know, country of origin labeling (COOL) is an issue of utmost importance for many Montana cattle producers. Last year's continued delay of COOL was deeply disappointing to me, as well as many of my constituents. This law has been on the books since 2002, and a handful of special interests have succeeded in working behind the scenes to prevent implementation.

You and I have discussed this issue a number of times, and I greatly appreciate our continued dialogue. You have always been honest and frank with me on this issue, despite our differences. One of the issues central to COOL is the potential cost of the program to the cattle industry. I do not want to see a rule written that places an undue burden on my producers. I have long believed that USDA overestimated the costs of COOL by a wide margin, and I know this opinion is shared by many in the countryside.

In 2004, USDA published final rules for COOL for fish and shellfish. It is my understanding that implementation of this program is going well. The real world examples provided by the labeling of these products should be a good reference for the rules related to beef and beef products. I believe that the debate over COOL could be better informed by these new facts. I request that USDA look to the implementation of labeling for fish and shellfish, and provide a new cost estimate for full implementation, as soon as possible.

Mr. Secretary, country of origin labeling is the law of the land, and it is time we keep our promise to cattle producers and implement this law. I remain hopeful that USDA will publish the final rules for COOL soon, so that industry will have time to prepare for compliance when labeling becomes mandatory in 2008. I look forward to continuing our discussion on this important issue, and I thank you for your leadership and dedication to agriculture.

Sincerely,



Conrad Burns