

Country of Origin Labeling for Meat: Separating Meatpacker Myths from Family Farmer Facts

Prepared by

U.S. Senator Tim Johnson

MYTH:

'The labeling law is impossible for USDA and the industry to implement.'

FACT:

The law gives USDA broad authority to piggyback existing government and industry programs, ensuring easier implementation. For instance, the new labeling law can be modeled after the National School Lunch program, Department of Defense subsistence program, or the Market Access Program. All of these existing programs are government run and ensure the origin and identity of food products are retained. The labeling law could also be modeled after existing industry programs, such as the USDA grade certification system, Certified Angus Beef, and other systems meatpackers use to provide special marketing labels for meat products.

MYTH:

'Producers are subject to third-party certification and on-site audits.'

FACT:

The law does not require third-party certification, nor does it preclude producer self-certification. On-site audits are not even mentioned in the law or the proposed rules. Currently, producers self-certify by affidavit that they don't feed their ruminants animal parts, as part of an existing BSE prevention effort. If self-certification works for food safety, it can work for labeling too.

MYTH:

'Country of origin violates trade agreements.'

FACT:

The country of origin labeling law complies with all trade agreements and many trading partners already require labeling. A total of 48 trading partners require labeling for some product(s) covered by the U.S. law, and 41 countries require country of origin labeling for meat. Indeed, 34 trading partners have country of origin labeling for muscle cuts of meat, and 33 trading partners require country of origin labeling for ground beef. Our most valuable export destinations for beef, Japan and Korea, already require labeling.

MYTH:

‘Consumers don’t care about country of origin labeling.’

FACT:

Every major consumer group in the U.S. supports the country of origin labeling law. Together, these groups represent more than 50 million Americans. Reports from Colorado State University and the University of Florida Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences indicate consumers believe the benefits of labeling far outweigh any costs.

MYTH:

‘Some livestock producers oppose meat labeling.’

FACT:

The largest and most respected agriculture organizations in the U.S., the National Farmers Union and the American Farm Bureau Federation, strongly support the labeling law. Many state cattle, pork, and sheep organizations support labeling. The only producer groups that oppose labeling have meatpacker representation in their membership.

MYTH:

‘There have not been any hearings on country of origin labeling.’

FACT:

Before enactment of mandatory labeling as part of the 2002 farm bill, the following hearings and Congressional action took place concerning country of origin labeling:

June 10, 1998 -- Senate Agriculture Committee hearing on country of origin labeling.

July 15, 1998 -- A country of origin labeling amendment offered by Senator Johnson (D-SD) was accepted by unanimous consent to the Senate’s Fiscal Year 1999 Agriculture Appropriations bill.

September 28, 1998 -- The Senate country of origin labeling provision was deleted from the final Fiscal Year 1999 Agriculture Appropriations conference report.

May 26, 1999 -- Senate Agriculture Committee hearing on country of origin labeling.

September 26, 2000 -- House Agriculture Committee hearing on country of origin labeling.

October 5, 2001-- House of Representatives voted 296-121 to adopt an amendment to the farm bill offered by Rep. Mary Bono (R-CA) to require country of origin labeling for produce.

November 15, 2001-- During mark-up of the farm bill in the Senate Agriculture Committee, the late Senator Paul Wellstone (D-MN) offered language virtually identical to S. 280 (the Consumer Right to Know Act sponsored by Sens. Johnson, Grassley, Enzi, Wellstone, Harkin) to require country of origin labeling for beef, pork, lamb, fruits, vegetables, peanuts, and fish. This language was adopted on a 11-10 vote.