

Q & A on Country of Origin Labeling

Written by Sen Chuck Grassley
Friday, 23 December 2011 14:42

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U.S. Senator Chuck Grassley

Q: Why do people have a beef with labeling the origin of the meat sold in grocery stores?

A: A lot of people want to know where the food on their tables comes from. Today, many food retailers are required to inform consumers about the country of origin of fresh fruits and vegetables, seafood, peanuts, pecans, macadamia nuts, ginseng, and ground muscle cuts of beef, pork, lamb, chicken and goat, thanks to legislation first passed as part of the farm bill in 2002, and updated along with the farm bill in 2008. The origin of almost everything you buy in the United States is labeled, so it's a no-brainer to provide the same information about meat and produce. Consumers deserve to know, and for producers, it's a positive opportunity to build consumer confidence. Unfortunately, making the law a reality for meat labeling, in particular, was a long and difficult process. For too long, the U.S. Department of Agriculture delayed implementation by relying on inaccurate information provided by meat processors and containing gross over-estimates about the cost of providing this information to consumers. Before the 2008 update, congressional committees responsible for funding agricultural programs withheld funds for COOL.

Q: What's the situation today?

A: In November, the World Trade Organization (WTO) sided with Canada and Mexico in a challenge by those countries both to COOL rules and voluntary suggestions from the

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administration to provide useful origin information to consumers. A trade dispute resolution panel of the WTO said the United States has the authority to require labeling, but the way our program works is unfair to livestock producers in Canada and Mexico. That's baloney. The labeling system in place in the United States gives imported livestock the same opportunity to compete in the U.S. marketplace that it had before COOL was implemented. What's more, Canada, Mexico and other countries require country-of-origin information to be provided to consumers in their own countries.

Q: What can be done about the WTO ruling?

A: At this point, the panel decision either will be adopted by a WTO Dispute Settlement Body, or an appeal to the decision will be considered by a WTO Appellate Body. Some groups are urging the administration to find a way to settle the dispute without further WTO proceedings, but it's time for top U.S. officials to appeal without delay. In December, I urged the U.S. Trade Representative, Ron Kirk, and the U.S. Secretary of Agriculture, Iowa's former governor Tom Vilsack, to challenge the panel decision. Eighteen other senators signed the letter which also urged these agency leaders to make sure that the COOL program meets international trade obligations while continuing to provide valuable information to consumers. The administration's handling of this WTO dispute will be closely monitored by many of us in Congress. I encourage them to take all necessary steps to defend our COOL regulations. America's farmers deliver an abundant, affordable and safe food supply, and they deserve credit for it.

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