

Give public clear COOL choice

If there's one thing I hate, it's waiting. I'm not very patient, and the phrase "wait and see" is a terrifying proposition. Unfortunately, that's exactly what we're going to have to do with country-of-origin labeling.

COOL officially hit grocery stores Sept. 30. Not only are we going to have to wait and see if it really helps the U.S.



For Starters

By JOSH FLINT

farmer, but we also have to wait until the grocery stores get it right.

At a local grocery store in Decatur, a butcher told me, "We've got six months to figure this thing out." The store had some meat marked with COOL labels. However, they said: Product of Canada, Mexico, U.S.

According to COOL rules, this is a

viable label. The animal could have been born in one country, fattened in another country and slaughtered in a third country. Or, the product, which was a sirloin steak, may have been commingled with other muscle cuts prior to shipment.

COOL was instituted in the 2002 Farm Bill to promote U.S. products to U.S. consumers. It took until now for governmental agencies to work out the kinks with the food industry. According to the American Farm Bureau Federation, the law covers fresh beef, pork, fish, lamb, chicken, goat meat, peanuts, macadamia nuts, pecans, ginseng, fruits and vegetables.

COOL was enacted for wild and farm-raised fish and shellfish in 2005. Retailers and suppliers are the ones responsible for labeling. Butcher shops, exporters, restaurants, food service, salad bars and delis are exempt.

On top of that, restructured or processed foods are exempt. In some cases, this makes sense; but it seems strange that products such as teriyaki-flavored pork loin and roasted peanuts are not covered.

Extra regulations

COOL could live up to the hype and ensure better prices for U.S. products. However, if a country's food supply experiences a serious hiccup, such as an outbreak of mad cow disease, COOL could cause distrust toward certain countries.

So, from a regulatory standpoint, what does this mean for Illinois' beef and pork producers? Initially, this means a lot of affidavits will have to be signed to verify an animal's country of origin when it's sold to the processor.

The good news is, producers cannot be fined by the government if they do not comply. Essentially, the retailer tells their supplier what information they need. The supplier then requires the producer to follow their guidelines. If a producer does not comply, more than likely they will lose a marketing option.

According to AFBF, records should be kept for one year after selling an animal. (For a copy of a producer affidavit, visit www.fb.org/newsroom/nr/nr2008/10-03-08/COOLProducerAffidavit.pdf.)

Give us a clear choice

As a consumer, I'm excited to see COOL take effect in my local grocery store.

I hope other consumers jump on board with this. If they don't, we've just added some expensive regulations that won't pay for themselves.

So how much is this thing worth? Personally, I'd be willing to pay quite a bit more for U.S. labeled products. If you want to put a monetary value on it, I'd say at least \$1 per pound more for U.S. ground beef. In fact, I don't think I'd consider ground beef from another country until it reached a spread of about \$2.50 per pound.

In the end, I think it's up to retailers and suppliers to make sure this thing plays out like it should. It seems to me products with more than one country of origin may not help U.S. farmers all that much. Therefore, retailers and suppliers need to ensure they are presenting the consumer with a clear choice.

For now, it looks like I'll be waiting to find COOL labels that make sense.

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