

COOL information can now be provided with little additional cost

By the time this column is read by the bulk of our readers, the results of the Presidential election will be known. But without regard to the results, one of the issues that ought to be on Congress's table is COOL (Country of Origin Labeling) for beef, poultry, and chicken as well as other land-based meats like lamb and bison.

While the US lost its WTO trade dispute with Canada over the country of origin labeling of beef products and Congress subsequently modified COOL, we believe it is time to put the issue back on the policy table.

To start with, the US had to abandon COOL because northern tier packers in the US deliberately discriminated against Canadian cattle by paying Canadian cattle producers less for their cattle than they paid US producers for US born, raised, and harvested animals. They did this to signal their opposition to COOL.

Even though packers are required to maintain traceback records in their system if E. coli or BSE is found in a meat sample somewhere between the slaughter of the animal and its appearance on the consumer's table, they used the "extra costs" of maintaining COOL records as a justification for paying Canadian cattle producers less.

A related issue that was raised with COOL for meats concerned the cost of setting up the information systems that would keep track of all this information. According to opponents, the costs would be prohibitive.

The interesting thing is that even after COOL for meats was eliminated, the information systems that were developed are still in use. The only difference is that the information is not universally printed on the retail label.

Every box of fish that arrives at a local retail outlet contains the following information: date of harvest, whether the fish was wild caught or farm raised, whether the fish has been previously frozen or is fresh, the date of the harvest, the processing date, and the sell by date. Not all of any given fish species is produced in the same country and that information is also recorded; the price is the same. Much of that information is not printed on the consumer label, but if the customer asks, the clerk can tap on the computer screen and provide them with the information.

Much of the same information is available for beef, pork, lamb, and bison. It is just that the information is not printed on the label. Part of the reason is that most producers/retailers see no marketing advantage to providing the COOL information that they already have to the consumer, unless it is a specialty branded product like Laura's Lean Beef or Schweid & Sons beef patties.

In the egg aisle, things are different. There are the undifferentiated commodity eggs that are sorted by size and shell color and then there are a wide range of other egg choices: vegetarian fed, pasture raised, boxes with pictures of farmers, and even stories of individual hens. The consumer has the choice of the eggs they want to purchase with some selling at prices in excess of twice that of commodity eggs. The market is robust, and many consumers care enough to pay more for eggs that are produced according to standards of importance to them. The consumers have the choice because the information is readily available at the point of sale.

We believe that the same would be true for meats, if COOL were reenacted to require that the information be printed on the label. Some consumers care and some don't, but for those

who care, the behavior we see on the egg aisle and the presence of Laura's Lean Beef and Schweid & Sons beef patties suggests that the same would be true for beef, pork, lamb, and bison products. Poultry could be included as well, though today most of it is domestically produced; production systems do vary.

COOL could make sure that information is available for those meats so customers can buy products that meet the standards of individual buyers. The cost of implementing such a system is negligible because most of the information already exists.

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