

## OPINION

### COOL opponents should quit their whining

By Wenonah Hauter

As a general rule, people like to know what they're eating. But thanks to a recent House vote forbidding USDA from implementing country-of-origin labeling in the upcoming fiscal year, consumers will remain blindfolded when shopping for any meat product that doesn't come in a can, box, or bag (see story on Page 1).

U.S. consumers get less information about the origin of their food than their counterparts in many other countries. The U.S. is one of only a handful of countries that do not require COOL. So, who's to blame?

From the start, USDA never wanted COOL, but the Bush Administration swallowed hard when the 2002 Farm Bill made its way through Congress. Well-funded COOL opponents had Agriculture Secretary Ann Veneman's ear long before the legislation was signed. As soon as it passed, she signaled that she wasn't going to implement the COOL provision.

Veneman suggested a "continent-of-origin" label to satisfy Canadian producers as a substitute for a specific U.S. label. While she later backed down from this position, it was clear COOL was going to encounter a rough road for full implementation.

COOL opponents managed to get one of their own appointed to a strategic position within USDA. Chuck Lambert, chief economist for the National Cattlemen's Beef Association, became under secretary for marketing and regulatory affairs. While at NCBA, he wrote a position paper arguing for voluntary rather than mandatory COOL. He said a voluntary approach would provide less disruption in the marketplace and more efficiency for the beef industry. Nowhere did he discuss possible benefits to consumers.

Since passage of the Farm Bill, COOL opponents have whined about the cost of the program, inflaming the debate with claims that the program would require mountains of paperwork, third party audits, and billions of dollars. USDA followed their lead with outrageously inflated cost estimates and unnecessarily complicated record keeping proposals seemingly intended to sabotage the program.

The USDA cost estimates were disputed by a University of Florida paper suggesting that the department's initial estimates were overblown by as



much as 95%. Further, the Florida study found significant consumer willingness-to-pay for COOL (see *FTR*, June, Page 13).

Many consumers would prefer to buy U.S. grown and processed food, but they currently do not have the information they need to act on this preference. A March

1999 Wirthlin Worldwide Survey showed 86% of consumers support origin labeling for meat, and a recent North Carolina State University study revealed that 71% would be willing to pay more for food if they knew it was grown locally.

Unless consumers are well-mobilized, Congress tends to pay much closer attention to well-funded COOL opponents. Their efforts paid off last month when the House denied any funding for the implementation of COOL for meat. This vote does a major disservice to consumers, as well as American farmers and ranchers, by potentially delaying a program that will allow consumers to make more informed purchasing decisions and give producers a desperately needed way to identify their livestock as products of the United States.

What are COOL opponents so worked up about? Are they nervous that consumers won't agree with their vision of shifting food production to the developing world, where labor and land are cheap, and environmental, worker safety, and pesticide rules are more lenient? Or do they really think that consumers don't deserve the same information about their food that they receive about many other consumer goods, from clothing to cars?

The recent Canadian BSE case provides a dramatic reminder of the lack of information available to consumers who are concerned about where their food comes from. Without COOL, consumers have no way to differentiate between foreign and domestic beef, limiting any benefit that might come from assurances that the United States is BSE-free. In light of this latest international food safety scare, Congress should be urging the USDA to act swiftly to implement COOL — not killing the program by removing its funding.

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