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New Legal Analysis Shows How Obama Administration Can Avoid Trade Sanctions by Strengthening Popular Consumer Country-of-Origin Meat Labels Ruled Against by WTO

As May 2013 Deadline Looms, WTO Compliance Process Begins; USDA Sends Draft COOL Regulations to OMB

WASHINGTON, D.C. – The United States can avoid trade sanctions by strengthening consumer labeling rather than gutting the popular country-of-origin labeling (COOL) meat labeling program against which the World Trade Organization (WTO) ruled in 2012, said Public Citizen as it released a [legal analysis](#) prepared for several consumer and farm groups by the trade law firm Stewart and Stewart.

“Ensuring American consumers’ right to know where their meat comes from must be the Obama administration’s priority,” said Lori Wallach, director of Public Citizen’s Global Trade Watch. “The American public’s antipathy toward our current trade policies would be greatly intensified if a WTO ruling empowered big agribusiness corporations to sell mystery meat here, despite U.S. consumers and Congress demanding these labels on which we all rely in grocery stores nationwide.”

By July 2013, the United States must respond to three 2012 WTO rulings against popular consumer policies, including the country-of-origin meat labels, “dolphin-safe” tuna labels and a U.S. ban on clove-, candy- and cola-flavored cigarettes that was aimed to curb youth smoking. As of May 23, 2013, Mexico and Canada, which attacked the U.S. meat labels at the WTO, can obtain authorization to impose trade sanctions against the United States that would remain in effect until the policy is altered.

The [new legal analysis](#) shows how the United States can meet WTO rules by strengthening existing regulations to provide more information and more accurate details to consumers. The U.S. Department of Agriculture sent new draft COOL rules to the Office of Budget and Management on Friday.

Background: After 50 years of U.S. government experimentation with voluntary labeling and efforts by U.S. consumer groups to institute a mandatory program, Congress enacted mandatory country-of-origin labeling for meat in the 2008 farm bill. The policy requires American retailers to label certain foods with the country (or countries) in which animals were born, raised or slaughtered. In their successful WTO challenge, Mexico and Canada argued that the mandatory program violated the limits that the WTO sets on what sorts of product-related “technical regulations” WTO countries are permitted to apply. Canada and Mexico suggested that the United States should eliminate mandatory labeling and return to voluntary COOL, or to standards suggested by the *Codex Alimentarius*, which is an international food standards body at which numerous international food firms play a central role. Neither option would provide U.S. consumers with the same level of information as the current U.S. labels.

[View the report here.](#)

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