

July 13, 2007

Dear Representative

Recent headlines about tainted food imports have made consumers more aware than ever of the importance of where their food comes from. Yet, with the exception of seafood, consumers don't have this basic information when they shop.

The failure to require country-of-origin labeling for meat and produce has left consumers in the dark. During years of debate over COOL, opponents have frequently claimed that consumer labeling is not a food safety issue. But the growing scandal over imported food and ingredients from China offers ample proof that consumers need origin labels to protect themselves because the federal government has not.

With only one percent of imported food inspected by the Food and Drug Administration and less than ten percent of imported meat and poultry inspected by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, consumers are essentially on their own when it comes to navigating the risk that comes from an increasingly global food supply. But without COOL, they have no way to make informed decisions, even if they want to avoid products from places with questionable safety records. Consumers deserve to know where (and under what regulations) the food they feed their families has been produced.

Since COOL was originally included in the 2002 Farm Bill, there have been numerous examples of how such labeling could help consumers make informed choices about what they want to buy. In 2003, the country's first case of mad cow disease was discovered in Washington, in a cow that was raised in Canada. Canada has since found nine more cases of the disease, and the USDA is poised to allow the import of older, riskier, cattle from Canada. Also in 2003, a hepatitis outbreak killed three people and sickened 600, after they ate green onions produced in Mexico with contaminated water.

And of course, recent developments have brought long overdue attention to the safety of imported food, as contamination and dangerous counterfeit ingredients have been found in products ranging from seafood to pet food to toothpaste.

More than 200 farming, ranching, food safety and consumer groups support country-of-origin labeling. And consumer support for COOL is not new. Surveys consistently show that more than 80 percent of Americans want to know where their food comes from, and that just as many are willing to pay a few extra cents to eat domestically raised meat, fruit and vegetables, if they should happen to cost more than imports. In March 2007, a national survey commissioned by Food & Water Watch found that 82 percent of consumers supported mandatory country-of-origin labeling. And just this week, a new poll by Consumers Union found that 92 percent of consumers want to see country-of-origin labeling on food.

A voluntary labeling regime is not good enough. The rules for voluntary labeling have been in effect for several years, yet most consumers never see country-of-origin labels on the meat they buy at the grocery store because most companies choose not to provide this information. Consumers are tired of eating blind because companies choose not to volunteer this basic information about their products. The time has come for full disclosure about where food comes from.

Consumers have waited long enough. We urge you to support the implementation of mandatory country-of-origin labeling for meat and produce as soon as possible. Please feel free to contact Patty Lovera at Food & Water Watch at (202) 797-6557 if you have any questions.

Thank you.

Sincerely,

Center for Food Safety

Consumer Federation of America

Consumers Union

Food & Water Watch

National Consumers League

Public Citizen