

COOL Labels Now Mandatory, Retailers in Grace Period Until March

by Aimee Nielson

LEXINGTON, Ky., (Nov. 19, 2008) — Consumers soon will find country-of-origin labeling, or COOL, on many food products. Retailers currently are in a six-month grace period since the legislation went into effect at the end of September. By March, the labels will appear on beef, pork, lamb, chicken and goat meat, as well as perishable agricultural commodities, peanuts, ginseng and macadamia nuts.

“Originally, country of origin labeling for red meat was part of the 2002 Farm Bill, but the program was made voluntary after difficulties with logistics were discovered,” said Gregg Rentfrow, extension meat specialist for the University of Kentucky College of Agriculture. “However, the call for mandatory COOL reappeared in the 2008 Farm Bill after safety concerns of imported foods arose, and President Bush signed the bill into existence, making the labels mandatory on Sept. 30.”

For red meat, all commodities packaged prior to Sept. 30 are exempt from the mandatory labeling legislation. If animals were in the United States and continuously remain in the United States on or before July 15, they are considered U.S. products. After July 15, only animals born, raised, fed and harvested in the United States can be labeled as a “Product of the U.S.”

“If an animal was born in another country, but raised, fed and harvested here in the United States, the resulting products will require both countries’ labels,” Rentfrow said. “If an animal is imported for immediate slaughter, it will have the original country’s label, and finished products imported into the United States will contain the exporting country’s label.”

Retailers must log each shipment, keep those records for at least one year and produce them within five days if requested. Products that are exempt from COOL are those intended for food service (restaurants) and those products where meat is an

ingredient in the final processed product.

Rentfrow said seafood products have displayed country of origin labels for the past few years. In that time, retailers and consumers have grown comfortable with the program and realized that some products are not from U.S. sources.

“Some consumers may be uncomfortable with the globalization of the red meat industry and may not understand why a package reads ‘A Product of Canada and the U.S.’ when cattle and pigs are a common sight around the country,” Rentfrow said. “Ground meat products may create the most confusion, as a package may contain meat from several different animals from three to four different countries. A sound understanding of the details of the livestock industry will become crucial to retailers, as they will be responsible for answering the consumers’ questions and easing their concerns.”

Retailers are currently operating within the six-month grace period before the labels must be displayed. Labels can be posted either on the package or displayed on the meat case in front of the individual commodities. Livestock producers must generate an affidavit detailing the birth location of each animal at each point of sale. The U.S. Department of Agriculture estimates that the cost of implementation for the first year of the program will be \$2.5 billion. Rentfrow said these costs will be covered partially by producers (\$376 million) and retailers (\$236 million) with the USDA funding the rest.

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