

# Storm Brewing Over COOL

by **Janie Gabbett** on 9/24/2008

Days before the Sept. 30 start of mandatory country-of-origin labeling (COOL), concern is growing that U.S. meat processors will use broader, mixed-origin labels rather than specifying when meat is of U.S. origin only, which Agriculture Secretary Ed Schafer said is not the intent of the law.

“A couple of major beef producers decided they were only going to label their meat as a mixed country of origin. That was not the intent of the law ... We think we have found a way to deal with that,” Schafer said in a speech to the National Association of State Departments of Agriculture, according to the *Grand Forks (N.D.) Herald*.

Using the multiple-country label would allow meat processors to avoid incurring the additional expense of segregating livestock based upon its country of origin.

The multiple-countries category was created to give packers that slaughter a mixture of U.S., Canadian and Mexican animals flexibility in labeling their product. The USDA regulations are not final and could be revised if it appears that packers are overusing the multiple-country labels.

“The bottom line is, there is a six-month period where we educate those who raise new questions or raise what they believe will be issues,” USDA spokesman Keith Williams told Meatingplace.com when asked to elaborate on how Schafer intends to ensure the use of the “Product of United States” label.

## Raising concerns

Schafer is not the only one crying foul over the possible overuse of the mixed-origin label, and some are pointing the blame back at USDA.

“USDA seems to be taking liberty with their interpretation of COOL, and that goes against the spirit of the law and the negotiated settlement between producer and packing industry representatives ... Producers and consumers deserve a common sense rule that allows U.S. product to be labeled as intended,” Sen. Tom Harkin (D-Iowa) said in a statement emailed to Meatingplace.com.

In a letter to Schafer earlier this month, Sen. Jon Tester (D-Mont.) raised the same concern that processors might choose the “cheapest and easiest option” giving consumers “the impression that there is no domestically born, raised and slaughtered livestock.”

## Consumers' call

In the end, it may be consumers who dictate how the new labels are applied.

“As a practical matter, we see consumer demand driving the usage of labels identifying U.S. meats,” Williams said.

Lloyd Day, administrator of the USDA's Agricultural Marketing Service, predicted some packers might actually be eager to claim the 100 percent American label. “We believe there are packers who want to sell the U.S. product, because they believe there will be a premium paid for it and because customers will demand it,” he told the *Omaha World-Herald*.

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