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Eating Blind

Why Congress and the Meat Industry Don't Want You to Know Where Your Food Comes From

After a year of headlines about mad cow disease, hepatitis scares and ground beef recalls, American consumers are more curious about where their food is from. On October 1st, consumers across the country should be able to buy groceries armed with more information about the fruits, vegetables, meat and fish they are purchasing – a label noting the country where these products were produced.

But thanks to political obstruction, consumers will have to wait until 2006 for this vital information about what they are feeding to their families.

Right now, the U.S. Department of Agriculture is supposed to be finalizing the implementation of a provision of the 2002 Farm Bill that requires “country of origin” labeling (COOL) for beef, lamb, pork, fish, fresh and frozen fruits and vegetables, and peanuts. The label would be found on foods sold in grocery stores and would state the food’s country of origin (for meat, the animal would have to be born raised and slaughtered in the U.S. to get the “Product of U.S.” seal.) The implementation date for mandatory COOL was supposed to be September 30, 2004.

Mandatory COOL was one of the most significant wins for family farmers in the controversial 2002 Farm Bill. But big agribusiness, especially the meat and grocery industries, doesn’t want consumers to know where their food comes from and has been working to kill COOL before it ever got started. As corporate consolidation of agriculture continues to drive family farmers out of business in record numbers, more of our food supply is controlled by a small group of companies. These companies don’t want to give ranchers and farmers a desperately needed way to identify their crops and livestock as products of the U.S. They seem to be nervous – and rightfully so – 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.

So, the industry played politics to protect their own interests, not consumers. First, agribusiness interests pressured Congress to delay the date when the law would go into effect. Instead of Sept. 30, 2004, Congress used the appropriations process – which funds the agency

implementing the law – to delay the effective date until September 2006 for everything covered by the law except fish. Now, there are rumors that mandatory seafood COOL could be delayed as well.

Next, some lawmakers are trying to change COOL into a voluntary program. The House Agriculture Committee recently passed the Food Promotion Act of 2004 (HR 4576), which repeals the mandatory country-of-origin labeling law and replaces it with a “voluntary” program. Voluntary labeling has been an option for two years, yet few food processors and meatpackers have been willing to participate. A voluntary program will not provide consumers and producers the level of assurance that a mandatory program can provide.

From the time much of our food leaves the field until it ends up on your fork, it’s had a wild adventure that rivals NBC’s hit reality show *Fear Factor*. With food already traveling 1,500 miles on average before reaching our tables, food imports increasing every year, and food safety scares like the mad cow disease in Canada, it’s past time for consumers to have the basic information necessary to buy food that was produced closer to home. Consumers deserve to know where (and under what regulations) the food they are buying has been produced. Such information could provide a marketing boost for domestic producers in dire need of a way to differentiate themselves in an increasingly global market.

Why would anyone oppose such basic information being provided to consumers? The biggest argument is over cost – but family farmers and ranchers have given the agency lots of ideas for making COOL a simple process that does not have to be expensive, utilizing information most producers already keep. According to the Florida Department of Agriculture, a state where country-of-origin labeling for produce has been law for more than 20 years, it costs supermarkets one or two man-hours per store a week. That’s far less than 1 cent per household per week.

Surveys show that 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. More than 200 farming, ranching, food safety and consumer groups support country-of-origin labeling.

Most U.S. trading partners – about 60 countries, including Canada and Mexico – already have some form of country-of-origin labeling. And eight U.S. states have similar laws in place, including Florida, Louisiana and Maine.

Consumers have a right to know where their food comes from, but in the U.S. we blindly eat meals every day without any way to find out where our vegetables are grown or our meat is produced. Given that we know where our clothes and cars are made, it seems logical that we should also know the same information about our food.

For more information on country-of-origin labeling, please visit www.americansforlabeling.org.