

February 26, 2003

The Honorable Ann Veneman
Secretary
United States Department of Agriculture
14th Street & Independence Avenue, SW
Washington, DC 20250

Dear Madam Secretary:

We write today to express our serious concern about recent revelations that United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) officials appear to have consulted only with opponents of mandatory country of-origin labeling before developing cost burden estimates associated with the implementation of the labeling requirements contained in the farm bill.

Through a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request, a coalition of country-of-origin labeling supporters received documents suggesting that USDA contacted just three organizations to gather information about labeling's record keeping and cost issues. These three organizations--the National Meat Association, the National Food Processors Association, and the National Pork Producers Council--are all vocal opponents of mandatory country-of-origin labeling and have worked hard to defeat it. Furthermore, it seems that USDA never contacted groups supportive of labeling before releasing a \$2 billion cost estimate for implementing labeling requirements--an estimate that is widely viewed as an indefensible exaggeration. We acknowledge that because USDA published the cost estimate in the Federal Register, all groups and persons interested in labeling will get an opportunity to respond to USDA's estimated cost. However, it is unjustifiable that before the public release of this estimate, USDA apparently met only with three opponents of country-of-origin labeling. It is also evident USDA chose not to meet with organizations representing the full spectrum of commodities covered by the program before releasing this exorbitant cost estimate.

As such, we believe USDA owes the public an explanation. Specifically, we respectfully request that you explain why USDA chose not to meet with labeling supporters before determining the estimated cost of the program. Additionally, we request that you explain why USDA only met with one producer organization representing just one of many commodities to be covered under the program. Finally, we would like to know whether and how USDA will remedy this matter by conducting a more objective cost analysis. We would be pleased to provide you a list of consumer, producer, and commodity-specific organizations that USDA did not consult with about the cost of labeling before announcing that estimated cost if such information would prove helpful.

We realize USDA opposed the inclusion of mandatory country-of-origin labeling in the farm bill.

Nevertheless, since Congress approved a labeling requirement in the farm bill, which was signed by the President, we expect USDA to dutifully carry out this program.

USDA must administer labeling in a balanced and trustworthy manner. Unfortunately, to date, USDA appears to be assisting labeling opponents in obstructing its chances for fair implementation. This is inexcusable, and we are determined to prevent the administrative dismantling of this vital program by its opponents.

Thank you for your attention to this most important matter. We look forward to your reply.

Sincerely,

Senators Signing Letter:

1. Johnson--(D-South Dakota)
2. Graham--(D-Florida)
3. Daschle--(D-South Dakota)
4. Enzi--(R-Wyoming)
5. Dorgan--(D-North Dakota)
6. Durbin--(D-Illinois)
7. Dayton--(D-Minnesota)
8. Harkin--(D-Iowa)
9. Nelson--(D-Florida)
10. Leahy--(D-Vermont)
11. Baucus--(D-Montana)
12. Conrad--(D-North Dakota)