

Mad for Labeling: Debunking the Myth That Country of Origin Labeling Could Prevent BSE Outbreaks

On December 23, 2003, the first case of Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy (BSE) – also known as “Mad Cow Disease” – discovered in the US was found in a dairy cow in Washington State. The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) quickly acted to quell this outbreak and reassure consumers that the US food supply remains the safest and most closely monitored in the world.

Despite this quick action, proponents of mandatory country of origin labeling (COOL) seized upon BSE to argue that COOL could have prevented or mitigated the effects of this outbreak.

Nothing could be further from the truth.

COOL would not have prevented the BSE outbreak because it is not a food safety program. Even proponents of labeling admit that mandatory COOL is solely designed to promote the sale of US agriculture products. There is absolutely no additional safety testing or monitoring required by the program, and it does not make the US food supply any safer. At a June 26, 2003 hearing of the House Committee on Agriculture, a representative of the American Farm Bureau Federation testified,

*“We are not talking about a food safety issue. We are simply saying this material or this product is grown in the United States. Now that doesn’t, at least to my mind, quantify any kind of quality or safety.”**

COOL would not have made the process of identifying and tracing the infected cow any easier. COOL entails providing country of origin information only at the retail-level. It is not an animal ID or animal trace back program. The only way to guarantee food safety is to institute an animal trace back system, similar to the one Canada has in place.

The statute creating mandatory COOL explicitly forbids the creation of an animal ID program. The inclusion of this prohibition clearly illustrates that the lawmakers who crafted it were not thinking of food safety.

Proponents who argue that, even if it does not directly relate to food safety, COOL gives consumers peace of mind ignore the fact that 70% of imported meat products would go unlabeled under the program. This is because restaurants, where Americans consume over half of their meals and snacks, are exempted from country of origin labeling. Do consumers only deserve peace of mind half of the time?

Ninety-five percent of beef sold at retail is born, raised and processed in the United States. The majority of beef sold by restaurants, however, is imported from a number of countries and will go unlabeled.

* House Committee on Agriculture, “Hearing on Mandatory Country of Origin Labeling”, June 26, 2003. Comments of Alan Foutz, President of the Colorado Farm Bureau, on behalf of the American Farm Bureau Federation, p. 69. The transcript is available on line at <http://agriculture.house.gov/hearings/10812.pdf>.