

For Immediate Release:
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Nationwide Coalition Urges USDA to Protect Integrity of Country of Origin Labels

229 farm, consumer, rural, faith, food and environmental groups from 45 states demand sensible labels

WASHINGTON, D.C.—A coalition of 229 farm, rural, faith, consumer and environmental organizations from 45 states delivered a letter urging the U.S. Department of Agriculture to protect the integrity of Country of Origin Labeling (COOL) for meat products.

The 2008 Farm Bill included mandatory COOL provisions for beef, pork, poultry, fresh and frozen fruits and vegetables and some nuts, but Canada and Mexico successfully challenged the implemented rules for meat products at the World Trade Organization as a barrier to international trade. The USDA has issued proposed new rules that simplify and clarify COOL to comply with the WTO decision.

“Consumers want more information about the source of their food, not less,” said Chris Waldrop, director of the Food Policy Institute at Consumer Federation of America. “Strengthening the Country of Origin Label provides consumers with more accurate and precise information about the source of beef and pork products they purchase.”

The proposed rules that the USDA issued in early March strengthen the COOL labels by ensuring that all meat from animals born, raised and processed in the United States will bear a “born, raised and slaughtered in the USA” label and eliminating some of the confusing, vague labeling provisions that were highlighted in the WTO ruling.

“U.S. farmers and ranchers take pride in what they produce, and consumers ought to be able to know the origins of their food,” said National Farmers Union President Roger Johnson. “NFU has long supported COOL and urges the USDA to move forward with the new, more accurate, strengthened proposed rule.”

Ben Burkett, president of the National Family Farm Coalition and a farmer from Mississippi, added: “COOL is very important for the farmer members of the Mississippi Association of Cooperatives as we market our products in our state and region. We strongly support the USDA’s revisions on this critical issue.”

Today’s letter demonstrates the broad-based support for sensible country of origin labeling rules. “Consumer and farmer advocates pushed for COOL for more than a decade to overcome the largest food processing and meatpacking companies that wanted to hide the source of the food from consumers,” said Wenonah Hauter, executive director of Food & Water Watch.

Even before COOL went into effect, Canada and Mexico challenged the commonsense

rules at the WTO. The international meatpacking industry still wants COOL eliminated from federal law.

“A regulatory fix is a preferred response to the WTO because the U.S. can preserve its sovereignty while simultaneously improving the accuracy of information conveyed to consumers,” said R-CALF USA CEO Bill Bullard.

The letter was submitted to the USDA as part of the regulatory comment period and sent to USDA Secretary Tom Vilsack. The federal comment period closes on April 11, 2013, and the WTO ruling directed USDA to offer new COOL rules by May 23, 2013.

A copy of the coalition letter can be viewed here: <http://ow.ly/jFt8Y>

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For more information, contact:

Kathy Ozer, National Family Farm Coalition, (202) 543-5675

Kevin Dowling, Western Organization of Resource Councils, (406) 252-9672

Chris Waldrop, Consumer Federation of America, (202) 797-8551

Melissa Augusto, National Farmers Union, (202) 554-1600

Anna Ghosh, Food & Water Watch, (415) 293-9905

Bill Bullard, R-CALF USA, (406) 252-2516