



Consumer Federation of America

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Consumer groups call on Obama Administration to defend country-of-origin labels on meat

The nation's largest consumer groups today wrote to the Obama administration, urging an appeal of the November 2011 ruling by a World Trade Organization (WTO) panel against U.S. country-of-origin labels on meat. The ruling followed a case brought by Canada and Mexico in December 2008 against the popular U.S. law, which was also opposed by large agribusiness corporations in the U.S.

"Poll after poll show that American consumers want to know where their food comes from," said Jean Halloran, director of Food Policy Initiatives at Consumers Union. "The WTO should not stand in the way."

The COOL law – implemented in March 2009 – was a result of a decades-long struggle to assure consumers are provided with basic information about the origin of meat products, fish and seafood, certain nuts and fresh fruits and vegetables.

"Consumers have been pushing for country-of-origin labeling for decades only to have the new law challenged at the WTO," said Chris Waldrop, director of the Food Policy Institute at Consumer Federation of America. "If upheld on appeal, the WTO ruling will undermine consumers' faith in the fairness of these international institutions."

Countries all around the world have some form of country-of-origin labeling, including Argentina, Australia, Japan, Canada, Mexico and the European Union.

"Consumers worldwide have successfully advocated for country-of-origin labeling requirements -- most more transparent and informative than the U.S. labels," said Wenonah Hauter, executive director of Food & Water Watch. "Neither the president nor the congress should bow to the will of international trade bureaucrats that want to take commonsense country-of-origin labels away from the American people."

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While the WTO panel affirmed the right of the United States to require country-of-origin labeling for meat products, the panelists concluded that requiring companies to comply with the law was too costly for imported livestock (in violation of WTO rules), but that the flexibilities in the law (made in response to demands by importers themselves) violated other WTO rules. The consumer groups point out that this conflicted ruling demonstrates the danger of emphasizing trade over consumer regulation.

The U.S. has until mid-March to appeal the ruling. If it is not appealed or is upheld on appeal, the U.S. may be asked to weaken or eliminate COOL.

"An appeal will buy the U.S. time and may help weaken or overturn the damaging lower panel ruling," said Lori Wallach, director of Public Citizen's Global Trade Watch. "But consumers are calling on Congress to challenge the legitimacy of any WTO ruling against popular consumer policies."

The letter sent to the administration can be found here:

http://www.consumerfed.org/pdfs/Consumer_group_Itr_COOL_appeal_2.24.12.pdf

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Contact:

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

Naomi Starkman, Consumers Union, 917-539-3924

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

Arden Manning, Public Citizen, 202-454-5108

Consumer Federation of America is an association of nearly 300 nonprofit consumer organizations that was established in 1968 to advance the consumer interest through research, advocacy and education.

Consumer Reports is the world's largest independent product-testing organization. Using its more than 50 labs, auto test center, and survey research center, the nonprofit rates thousands of products and services annually. Founded in 1936, Consumer Reports has over 8 million subscribers to its magazine, website, and other publications. Its advocacy division, **Consumers Union**, works for health reform, food and product safety, financial reform, and other consumer issues in Washington, D.C., the states, and in the marketplace.

Food & Water Watch works to ensure the food, water and fish we consume is safe, accessible and sustainable. So we can all enjoy and trust in what we eat and drink, we help people take charge of where their food comes from, keep clean, affordable, public tap water flowing freely to our homes, protect the environmental quality of oceans, force government to do its job protecting citizens, and educate about the importance of keeping shared resources under public control.

Public Citizen is a national, nonprofit consumer advocacy organization based in Washington, D.C. founded in 1971.