

Tell USDA to Fix the Rules for COOL!

Why Consumers Need Country of Origin Labeling

In August, the USDA released their plan for mandatory country of origin labeling of meat, produce and nuts. After years of delay caused by the meat, food processing and grocery industries, country of origin labeling (COOL) goes into effect September 30.

Thanks to the 2008 Farm Bill, the USDA rules establish strong standards for which meat products can be called “Product of the U.S.” But the rules also contain a massive loophole that will allow large quantities of food to go without labeling. Because USDA established a very broad definition for “processed” foods that are exempt from COOL, most of the frozen vegetables, pork products and nuts consumers see in stores will not have to be labeled.

The USDA is accepting comments on COOL until the end of September.

Tell them to close the loopholes for ‘processed’ foods!



Where is your food coming from?

How to comment

1. Send a letter: Country of Origin Labeling Program, Room 2607-S, Agricultural Marketing Service, USDA, STOP 0254, 1400 Independence Avenue SW, Washington DC 20250-0254.

*** Include “Docket No. AMS-LS-07-0081” in the opening line of your letter.

2. Send a fax: (202) 354-4693

*** Include “Docket No. AMS-LS-07-0081” in your letter.

3. Go to www.foodandwaterwatch.org and click on “Take Action” to send an electronic comment.

What to tell USDA

1. Consumers want as much information as possible about their food, whether it has one ingredient or more and whether or not it has been smoked or roasted.
2. It is inexcusable to exempt so much food from this basic labeling requirement just because one ingredient has been added or because something has been roasted or cooked.
3. The USDA needs to dramatically limit the use of the exemption for processed foods so that consumers get the most benefit possible from country-of-origin labeling.

Country of Origin Labeling

Most of us are used to seeing labels that tell us where our clothes, electronics, toys, dishes, and even cars are produced. So why don't we know where our food comes from? We will soon, when country-of-origin labeling – known as “COOL” – is required for red meat, chicken, goat, fresh and frozen fruits and vegetables, peanuts, pecans, macadamia nuts, and ginseng.

It's been a long, hard fight to get this labeling on our food. And if grocery store chains, large food processors and other agribusinesses got their way, consumers would remain in the dark. They don't want you to know that tomatoes, peppers and other fruits and vegetables are being imported from Mexico and Chile, that meat is coming from Brazil and Argentina, and that garlic, apples and even poultry are being shipped from China.

Our food is increasingly coming from places with weaker food safety, water quality, pesticide and labor standards than the United States. The U.S. government only inspects about one percent of imported food. And most consumers don't realize that meat bearing a USDA stamp could have been produced abroad, in plants not visited by USDA meat inspectors.

It's not just consumers who are affected. Tens of thousands of U.S. farmers and ranchers have gone out of business as agricultural imports have soared. But country



of origin labeling could give U.S. farmers and ranchers a way to distinguish their products from imports.

Congress actually approved a mandatory COOL law in 2002 that covered beef, pork, lamb, fresh and frozen fruits and vegetables, fish, shellfish and peanuts. But the meatpacking, food processing and grocery retailer industries pressured Congress to delay its implementation until 2008 for all foods except seafood, which went into effect as scheduled in 2004.

But after a wave of scandals about unsafe imported food, COOL was too hot for Congress to ignore in the 2007 Farm Bill process. When the Farm Bill finally passed in 2008, it contained a strong requirement for which meat can bear a “Product of the U.S.” label and added several foods, including chicken, to the list of what is covered by COOL.

Mandatory country of origin labeling goes into effect for red meat, chicken, goat, fresh and frozen fruits and vegetables, peanuts, pecans, macadamia nuts, and ginseng on September 30, 2008. But the USDA couldn't resist taking one more shot at COOL. When writing the regulations for COOL, the agency used an overly broad definition for what foods are “processed” (and are exempt from labeling requirements) which means that most frozen vegetables, pork products and nuts will not be labeled.

See the opposite page for information on how to submit a comment to USDA telling them to close the loopholes in their COOL rule.

For more information on COOL, go to www.foodandwaterwatch.org.

For more information:

web: www.foodandwaterwatch.org

email: info@fwwatch.org

phone: (202) 683-2500

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Percentage of foods imported into the United States (foods covered by the country-of-origin law)

Fish and Shellfish	81
Asparagus	67
Artichokes	61
Grapes	53
Lamb	51
Cucumbers	49
Garlic	49
Eggplant	45
Tomatoes	34
Bell Peppers	34
Cantaloupe	32
Honeydew Melon	30
Beef	13

Sources: USDA Economic Research Service and NOAA National Marine Fisheries Service