

COOL Considerations For Cow-Calf & Stocker Cattle

Producers

Mandatory country-of-origin labeling (COOL) will take effect Sept. 30, 2008. There are specific rules on the definition of retailers and on processed foods (which are exempted) and on foodservice establishments (which are also exempted); but, in general, beef sold in retail markets must bear a label or notice to consumers about the origin of the beef. Only beef from animals born, raised and slaughtered in the U.S. may be labeled “Product of U.S.A.” Other product must identify the country or countries of origin, which might include the U.S. and other countries.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture Agricultural Marketing Service (USDA-AMS) has indicated that it will use the first six months to help retailers and suppliers come into compliance with the law.

Meatpackers are considered the originators of the origin claim, but the interim final rule indicates that the slaughter facility “must possess or have legal access to records that are necessary to substantiate the origin claim.” “A producer affidavit shall be considered acceptable evidence provided it is made by someone having firsthand knowledge of the origin of the animals and identifies the animals unique to the transaction.”

Records maintained in the course of normal conduct of business may serve as verification. Animals that are part of a National Animal Identification System (NAIS)-compliant or other recognized official identification system may use the animal identification (ID) to verify origin claims.

Cow-calf producers can use a wide variety of herd or calving records, feed purchases, animal health or vaccine purchases to document the normal level of production that would verify the origin of calves they sell. Producers should be prepared to provide an affidavit to the buyer stating the origin and the existence of such records. Producers should keep a copy of the affidavit noting the buyer and/or the date and location of the sale.

COOL also covers meat from breeding animals, which means that producers should keep records of raised animals used for breeding and should request an affidavit for any purchased cows or bulls.

All animals in the U.S. as of July 15, 2008, are considered to be U.S. origin. It is important for cow-calf producers to document herd size and composition for these

animals that are “grandfathered” in under this date. Young cows that may not be sold for several years may need this documentation to verify the status as of July 15, 2008.

Stocker producers, like other suppliers, must “maintain records to establish and identify the immediate previous source and the immediate subsequent recipient.” Commingling of animals creates a challenge, but AMS has indicated that as long as a producer has records of purchases and sales that reasonably account for total animal sales, individual animals or subsets of animals need not be traced back to specific purchase group(s). Thus, animals purchased from a variety of sources arriving with affidavits that show that animals all have the same origin, can be commingled into different sales groups and sold with affidavits that verify the origin of the animals.

Depending on the flow of animals into and out of an operation, producers may find it advantageous to use a more detailed tracking system to account for sources and destinations of cattle. Of course, if a producer has animals with different origins, those animals should be segregated by origin group with appropriate records to account for each origin group unless they are part of an NAIS-compliant or other individual animal ID program to track animals. As noted above, NAIS-compliant animals may use the animal ID as verification of origin. Animals on hand as of July 15, 2008, are covered under the previously mentioned grandfather clause.

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Source: *Derrell S. Peel, OSU Livestock Marketing Specialist*