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Group Supports Senators' Requests That Vilsack Restore Congress's Intent in COOL Rule

WASHINGTON, D.C. — R-CALF USA applauds a group of bipartisan senators who have contacted Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack to request that he abide by the congressional intent of the mandatory country-of-origin labeling (COOL) law that currently is under review as a "Rural Agenda" item by the Obama Administration.

"We write to highlight our concern with loopholes granted in this rule, which allow meatpackers to put a multiple-country-of-origin label on products that are exclusively U.S. products, as well as those that are foreign. The USDA regulations defeat the primary purpose of COOL — provide clear, accurate and truthful information to American consumers...If we are just creating a system to label all products as multiple country origin, there is no value in COOL and no benefit to the consumer," states a Feb. 3, 2009, letter sent to Vilsack by the following Senators: Byron Dorgan (D-N.D.), Russ Feingold (D-Wis.), Kent Conrad (D-N.D.), Amy Klobuchar (D-Minn.), Ron Wyden (D-Ore.), Jon Tester (D-Mont.) and Diane Feinstein (D-Calif.).

"We appreciate the decision to reexamine the final rule for mandatory COOL ... Ensuring that consumers throughout America have the opportunity to identify 'U.S. origin' exclusive product is a priority ...," wrote Sen. Tim Johnson (D-S.D.) and Sen. Mike Enzi (R-Wyo.) in a letter to Vilsack dated Jan. 22, 2009.

"R-CALF truly appreciates the efforts of these senators to ensure that COOL is properly implemented and to keep it in the forefront of discussions with the Administration, and we are aware that Secretary Vilsack strongly supports COOL," said R-CALF USA COOL Committee Chair Mike Schultz. "As such, we hope correcting these loopholes won't take long and that improvements to the COOL rule will be implemented as quickly as possible to benefit both U.S. cattle producers and U.S. beef consumers."

Additionally, R-CALF USA also has contacted Vilsack to request the following, with regard to the COOL rule:

* Meat packers must be prohibited from labeling meat derived from animals exclusively born, raised, and slaughtered in the U.S. with a mixed-origin label.

* To eliminate the need for unnecessary paperwork from producers, meat packers must be authorized to visually inspect each animal that is being slaughtered for the presence or absence of foreign import markings, and declare animals lacking any foreign import marking as exclusively originating in the United States.

* Meat from animals imported for immediate slaughter must be labeled with the name of the foreign country appearing first on the label followed by the name of the United States, e.g., "Product of Canada and the U.S."

* Commodities with different origins sold in bulk containers, such as a full-service meat counter, must be segregated or individually labeled as to their respective country-of-origin so consumers can choose to purchase commodities from the country of their choice.

* Commodities covered by COOL must be subject to labeling requirements even if they undergo minor processing such as cooking, smoking, curing, breading or adding tomato sauce.

* Meat processors must be prohibited from including the name of a country on a ground meat label if the processor discontinued sourcing that product from the foreign country for more than one week.

Note: To view/download the senators' letters, please visit the "Country-of-Origin Labeling" link at www.r-calfusa.com.

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R-CALF USA (Ranchers-Cattlemen Action Legal Fund, United Stockgrowers of America) is a national, non-profit organization dedicated to ensuring the continued profitability and viability of the U.S. cattle industry. R-CALF USA represents thousands of U.S. cattle producers on trade and marketing issues. Members are located across 47 states and are primarily cow-calf operators, cattle backgrounders, and/or feedlot owners. R-CALF USA has dozens of affiliate organizations and various main-street businesses are associate members. For more information, visit www.r-calfusa.com or, call 406-252-2516.