

ID *or* Labeling

MU beef specialists prefer industry-established ID system to improve beef safety.

Story by

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An industry-established animal identification (ID) system would do more to improve beef safety than country-of-origin labeling (sometimes referred to as COL or COOL), say KC Olson and Vern Pierce, Extension beef specialists with the University of Missouri (MU) Commercial Agriculture Program.

The discovery of a dairy cow infected with bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE) in Washington state has prompted discussion in Congress to implement country-of-origin labeling, a provision of the 2002 Farm Bill requiring retail labels to be placed on certain meats, fish, fruits and vegetables. Country-of-origin labeling requirements were to take effect Sept. 30, 2004, but last fall the U.S. House of Representatives passed a bill to delay the program until 2006. The Senate passed the fiscal year 2004 Omnibus Appropriations Bill in late January.

Proponents of country-of-origin labeling contend the retail labels would improve food safety and allow consumers to choose between U.S. and foreign beef.

“COOL carries with it no food safety or trade authority, so it’s unlikely that it would provide any additional protection,” Olson says. “The legal precedent for COOL is the consumer truth-in-labeling law, which requires food label claims to be true. It’s the law that ensures that if Diet Coke® claims to have only one calorie, it only has one calorie.”

Olson agrees country-of-origin labeling would let consumers identify foreign beef at the meat counter, but only if they can find it. He says imported beef represents about 18% of the U.S. beef supply, but about 80% of that would be exempt from regulation, which doesn’t require beef marketed through restaurants or processed beef to carry a label.

“The U.S. beef industry is being asked to bear the cost of COOL to differentiate what amounts to about 2% to 4% of the domestic beef supply,” Olson says. “These costs have been estimated to be as high as \$3.9 billion per year.”

Pierce says these costs would affect all beef producers. “COOL requires cattlemen, whether they have seven cows or 700, to implement an auditable, third-party verification system to prove where every calf is produced and processed,” he says.

“It would be a tremendous economic burden to all 63,000 beef farms in Missouri, with very little benefit,” he adds. “While consumers are concerned about food safety, they know we have

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the safest food in the world. A recent National Cattlemen's Beef Association (NCBA) survey found that even in the wake of the BSE case, 89% of American consumers remain confident in the safety of U.S. beef."

While retail labeling would not protect against meat from a BSE-infected cow

entering the food supply, Olson and Pierce agree that the food safety risk and economic impact of such a scenario could be lessened through a market-driven animal ID system.

"The primary reason we were able to trace the cow in Washington was because it was a dairy cow, and the dairy industry has its own ID system," Pierce says. "Had it been a beef heifer or steer, it would have

been much more difficult to trace."

"It's a speed-of-containment issue," Olson says. "If an infected animal [were] detected, its origin could be identified quickly, and appropriate food safety measures could be taken."

Currently, the USDA Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) has proposed a national ID system, but Pierce says an industry-established system driven

by the open market would be more efficient at tracking cattle and providing consumer information.

"The industry's moving in this direction," he says. "All it will take is someone like Wal-Mart to say they want to know the origin and history of every animal they buy."

"An industry-driven national ID system would remove the anonymity of commerce that exists in the beef industry today," Olson says. "Data describing animal health, genetics and management could be shared between trading partners. It would allow food manufacturers to identify and purchase cattle from the highest-quality sources and to eliminate those that have been managed poorly. A situation like this should provide consumers with the utmost degree of confidence about the beef they buy."

Government ID systems, such as those in Canada and Europe, are expensive and are primarily for the purpose of government traceback, Olson adds. "They do nothing to remove anonymity from the marketing system. If we want to keep our consumers safe, we need a preemptive ID system that allows for the sharing of data, and I believe an industry-driven system will do this most efficiently."

Pierce says one segment of the beef industry where many producers already maintain the identity of an animal from birth to harvest is the branded-beef market. These products receive a premium price for a particular value-added characteristic, such as how an animal is raised.

He says an industry-driven ID system could be implemented without excess burden to cow-calf producers, citing the Missouri Premier Beef Marketing Program as an example.

"In 1998 we established the program to help producers earn more by delivering a higher-quality product to the market," Pierce says. "Maintaining records from birth to slaughter is one component of the program. To date, cow-calf producers have averaged a net profit of \$50 more per head through yearling age of the animal. Some producers were able to double their profits."

More information about the Missouri Premier Beef Marketing Program is available online at http://agebbfp.missouri.edu/commag/beefanddairy/pb_index.htm.

Editor's Note: Jenkins is senior information specialist for the MU Extension & Ag Information Department, which supplied this article.

For more on country-of-origin labeling, visit the Angus Productions Inc. (API) topic site www.countryoforiginlabeling.info. It is not the purpose of this Web site to take a stance on the issue, and posts don't necessarily reflect the opinions of the American Angus Association or API. The purpose of the Web site is to serve as a gateway to information regarding the current interpretation of the legislation, to inform you of meeting dates that relate to country-of-origin labeling and to make you aware of current actions being taken by cattlemen across the country. We will share the various viewpoints on the issue and the underlying reasons for those viewpoints. By doing so, we hope to equip you with the information you need to make decisions and to conform to the law.

