

A Consumer's Guide to Country of Origin Labeling

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Consumers may have noticed something different about their local retail meat case. Since March 2009, all retail red meats, seafood and shellfish, and fruits and vegetables must contain a "Country of Origin Label," or COOL. COOL was designed to further inform consumers on the origins of their food, but it may have caused some confusion.

Originally, country of origin labeling for red meat was part of the Farm Security and Rural Investment Act of 2002, also known as the 2002 Farm Bill, but the program was made voluntary after difficulties with logistics were discovered. However, the call for mandatory country of origin labeling reappeared in the 2008 Farm Bill after safety concerns about imported foods arose, and the bill was signed into existence. Country of origin labels became required on these products:

- all whole muscle and ground products of beef, pork, lamb, chicken, goat meat (chevon);
- fish and shellfish (indicating method of production such as wild or farm-raised);
- perishable agricultural commodities such as fresh and frozen fruits and vegetables;
- peanuts;
- pecans;
- ginseng; and
- macadamia nuts.

Country of Origin Label Criteria

The following four categories require country of origin labels:

1. "Product of the U.S.(A.)"

Only animals (beef, pork, lamb, goat, chicken) or fish and shellfish born or hatched, raised, harvested, and processed in the United States can display the label "Product of the U.S.(A.)." In addition, perishable agricultural commodities, nuts, and ginseng harvested in the United States are labeled as U.S. products.

2. "Multiple Countries of Origin"

Animals that were born or hatched in another country but raised and harvested in the United States must display a label containing all the countries involved in production. For example, a pig that was born in Canada but shipped to, raised, and harvested in the United States is labeled "Product of U.S. and Canada." Perishable agricultural commodities, nuts, and ginseng commingled with products from another country contain the label of both countries. For example, Roma tomatoes from Mexico and the United States are labeled "Product of Mexico and the U.S."

3. "Imported for Immediate Slaughter"

Meat from an animal that was born and raised in another country but imported to the United States for direct, immediate slaughter must display the labels of both countries. In this situation, the country in which the animal was born

and raised is listed first. For example, a beef animal born and raised in Mexico but imported to the United States for slaughter is labeled "Product of Mexico and the U.S."

4. "Product of Foreign Origin"

Commodities born or hatched, raised, harvested, processed, and imported to the United States for direct sales must display the label of the exporting country. For example, lamb chops from a lamb from New Zealand are labeled "Product of New Zealand."

All retailers must display the country of origin labels in either of these places as long as the declaration is legible: directly on the package, a placard on the retail case, a band, a twist tie, or any other type of display in a conspicuous location. Displaying the flag of the countries of origin in place of wording is not allowed. Retailers with fewer than \$230,000 in annual sales and foodservice establishments such as restaurants, cafeterias, delicatessens, etc. are exempt from displaying country of origin labels. In addition, processed foods are exempt from declaring a label; examples of processed foods include beef pies, frozen vegetables, fruit pies, etc.

Reducing Confusion

Consumers have voiced concerns or confusion over the labels. Because cattle and pigs are a common sight along the highways and parkways of the United States, some wonder why beef sold in the local supermarket may be labeled "Product of U.S., Mexico, and Canada" or why pork spareribs are labeled "Product

of U.S.A. and Canada.” Since 2004, fish and shellfish country of origin labeling has been in effect, and consumers have become comfortable with the idea that these commodities are from other countries or processed by other countries. However, consumers may not be aware of the globalization of the livestock industry and are asking questions on why companies are selling meat from Mexico or Canada.

Cattle that are born and raised in the United States must be accompanied by a signed affidavit at each point of sale indicating that the animal was born in this country. However, it is not uncommon for North American countries such as Canada and Mexico to export

their livestock to the United States for feeding or processing. Canada has a limited number of processing plants and access to economical feeds; therefore, livestock may be exported to the United States for processing and/or low-cost feeding. Furthermore, feedlot operators purchase cattle from Mexico and feed them a higher plane of nutrition. Under this feeding regimen, these animals will exhibit a phenomenon known as compensatory gain, or catch-up growth and will gain more weight faster on the same amount of food as animals on a normal plane of nutrition. This does not mean the animals were starved, but they may not have been fed a nutritionally dense diet as they would receive in the United States.

Responsibility for Labeling

The responsibility for labeling has fallen on the retailer. Therefore, to simplify things, meat packing plants are using a blanket label of “Product of U.S., Canada, and Mexico” or “Product of U.S. and Canada.” Although our meat products contain this broad label, the vast majority of our meats are of U.S. origin. It is important to note that countries exporting food products into the United States must meet the same sanitation and safety standards as U.S.-made products. Regardless of what country the animal came from, the U.S. meat supply continues to be the safest in the world.