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## Sec. Vilsack implements voluntarily 'enhanced' COOL rules

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As expected, Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack announced late Friday that the final rule for USDA's Country of Origin Labeling (COOL) program will take effect March 16<sup>th</sup> as scheduled. At the same time, the Secretary delivered a letter to meat packers and processors requesting voluntary compliance with more precise labeling standards.

Vilsack explained that "I strongly support Country of Origin Labeling. It's a critical step toward providing consumers with additional information about the origin of their food." As part of this support, Vilsack made it clear to the meat industry that USDA will monitor industry compliance closely and that "additional rulemaking may be necessary to provide consumers with adequate information."

National Farmers Union President Tom Buis immediately welcomed Vilsack's actions, saying that "COOL has little value if products are not clearly labeled with their true country of origin. I'm pleased Secretary Vilsack acknowledges this and is taking the appropriate steps to ensure our food is properly labeled." Additional reaction will be available in a **special audio report by Stewart Doan, available Monday on the Agri-Pulse web site**. For details on the COOL program, go to: <http://www.agri-pulse.com/uploaded/20090112H4.pdf>

### Secretary Vilsack's Feb. 20<sup>th</sup> letter to industry stakeholders states:

Dear Industry Representative:

This letter pertains to the implementation of the mandatory Country of Origin Labeling (COOL) Final Rule (74 FR 2658). Regulations implementing the Country of Origin Labeling legislation contained in the 2008 Farm Bill are important to providing consumers with additional information about the source of food products and to helping producers differentiate their products.

Though it is important for the COOL Final Rule to go into effect in a timely manner and for the rule to proceed with the March 16, 2009 implementation date, there are certain components of the Final Rule promulgated by the previous Administration that raise legitimate concerns.

In particular, I am concerned about the regulation's treatment of product from multiple countries, exemptions provided to processed food, and time allowances provided to manufacturers for labeling ground meat products.

In light of these concerns, I am suggesting, after the effective date of the final rule, that the industry voluntarily adopt the following practices to ensure that consumers are adequately informed about the source of food products:

**Labeling of product from multiple countries of origin**

In order to provide consumers with sufficient information about the origin of products, processors should voluntarily include information about what production step occurred in each country when multiple countries appear on the label. For example, animals born and raised in Country X and slaughtered in Country Y might be labeled as 'Born and Raised in Country X and Slaughtered in Country Y'. Animals born in Country X but Raised and Slaughtered in Country Y might be labeled as 'Born in Country X and Raised and Slaughtered in Country Y'.

**Processed Foods**

The definition of processed foods contained in the Final Rule may be too broadly drafted. Even if products are subject to curing, smoking, broiling, grilling, or steaming, voluntary labeling would be appropriate.

**Inventory Allowance**

The language in the Final Rule allows a label for ground meat product to bear the name of a country, even if product from that country was not present in a processor's inventory, for up to 60 days. This provision allows for labels to be used in a way that does not clearly indicate the product's country of origin. Reducing the time allowance to ten days would limit the amount of product with these labels and would enhance the credibility of the label.

The Department of Agriculture will be closely reviewing industry compliance with the regulation and its performance in relation to these suggestions for voluntary action. Depending on this performance, I will carefully consider whether modifications to the rule will be necessary to achieve the intent of Congress.

Thank you for your thoughtful consideration.

Sincerely,  
[signed]  
Thomas J. Vilsack  
Secretary