

MEAT MATTERS

COUNTRY-OF-ORIGIN LABELING ON MEAT PRODUCTS

Frequently Asked Questions

Will country-of-origin labels raise the cost of meat?

USDA estimated the cost to implement mandatory country-of-origin labeling in the first year alone be about \$2.5 billion. Given the costs associated with record-keeping and the necessary segregation of livestock and meat in plants based on their origin that will be critical in ensuring label accuracy, that number could be too low. How these costs will be spread across meat products and how much prices will rise is yet to be determined.

How do these labels benefit consumers?

Congress has determined that country-of-origin labels are important to consumers. Whether consumers will pay more and if so how much more they will pay at a time when prices are hitting record levels due to spiking livestock feed prices remains in question.

Don't these labels already exist?

Currently, finished products in consumer packaging that are imported from other countries, such as Danish hams or Canadian pork loins, for example, say "Product of Denmark" or "Product of Canada." Before September 30, 2008, if meat was processed in the U.S., it was considered a U.S. product and no labeling was required detailing its geographic history.

Why doesn't this labeling rule apply to foodservice or processed meat products?

Congress determined that products intended for foodservice and processed meat products should be exempt from the law.

Frequently Asked Questions

How much meat is imported from Mexico?

Very little. However, many young cattle are imported from Mexico and are subsequently raised and processed in the U.S. If you see a beef product bearing the label "Product of U.S. and Mexico," that label reflects the fact that the animal was born in Mexico, but raised from an early age in the U.S. and then processed.

Are imported meat products as safe as U.S. products?

Exporting meat products to the U.S. is not easy because the U.S. government requires that these products meet the same high standards as U.S. products.

To be eligible to export to the U.S., a foreign country's inspection system has to be found by USDA to be equivalent to the U.S. system. In addition, meat plants in other countries that wish to export must document that they are following U.S. food safety standards or standards that are equivalent to U.S. standards. These plants must be certified by the USDA. When the meat products arrive at the U.S. border, they are subject to more safety inspections. Finally, if the imported meat is further processed in the U.S., it is subject again to the inspection requirements administered by USDA.

Only a limited number of plants within a limited number of nations meet these tough standards. U.S. meat companies wouldn't buy these products, use them in production, and apply the U.S. company label if they weren't confident in the imported product's safety.

For more information, please visit www.ams.usda.gov.



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Consumers soon will see new information in their grocery store meat departments: country-of-origin labeling for fresh meat products. The meat products are the same *wholesome and delicious products consumers have enjoyed for years*. They simply have more information.

The U.S. Congress determined that country-of-origin information should be provided for some meat products. Beginning in October 2008, country-of-origin information is appearing on meat product labels or on signs in the meat department to indicate the country or countries where an animal may have been born, raised and processed. Sometimes the label will identify only a single country and sometimes it may list multiple countries.

The labels are required on single-ingredient, unprocessed meat products, such as ground beef, roasts, chops and other cuts sold in retail food stores. Labels are not required on meat products that are processed, such as bacon, cured ham or corned beef, or include more than one ingredient. Meat products sold at restaurants are not subject to country-of-origin labeling.

Consumers are sometimes surprised to learn about the path that livestock and meat products travel before meat arrives on the table. Livestock and meat production has become very specialized. Some farmers specialize in breeding livestock and only raising them to a very young age. Another farmer may focus on growing these livestock to a certain age or all the way to maturity. Feedlot operators specialize in feeding and “fattening” cattle in the weeks or months leading up to processing. In some cases, these different operations that handle an animal may be in different countries.

Although the majority of meat in the U.S. is from livestock that are born, raised and processed within U.S. borders, a significant percentage is not. For example, Canada raises many piglets and sends them to the U.S. where they are raised to maturity and processed.

Canada and Mexico export young cattle to the U.S. to be fed and fattened.

Muscle Cut Labels

To reflect these different paths, the new country-of-origin labels will indicate the full range of countries where the animals were raised and processed. Four categories of labels will soon appear on meat products.

United States Origin – Only meat from livestock that are born, raised and processed in the U.S. may say “Product of the U.S.”

Multiple Countries of Origin – In some cases, livestock may be born in one country, but sent at an early age to another country to be raised and processed. In other cases, livestock may be born and raised in one country, but exported for processing to another country.

Under this broad category, labels may read, “Product of the U.S., Canada and Mexico” or “Product of the U.S. and Canada” or “Product of the U.S. and Mexico.”

Imported for Direct Processing – If livestock are brought directly to the U.S. for processing and the livestock spend less than 14 days in this country, meat from these livestock may read, “Product of Canada and the U.S.” When livestock are imported into the United States for direct processing, the exporting country will be listed first on the label.

Imported, Finished Product – Some meat is imported into the United States processed and ready for sale to the consumer. Examples include Danish hams, Italian salamis and lamb from New Zealand and Australia. These products must say “Product of Denmark” or “Product of New Zealand.”

Regardless of where livestock are born, raised or processed, all meat products sold in the U.S. must meet the same, high food safety standards.

Ground Meat Product Labels

When ground beef is processed, meat from various plants is sometimes shipped to a single plant that specializes in making ground beef. Sometimes, imported beef is used and blended in with beef produced at U.S. plants from the variety of animals described above. In many instances, leaner beef from countries such as Australia and New Zealand, where livestock are typically grass-fed, is blended with beef from corn-fed cattle in the U.S. in different ratios to produce the products we commonly buy, such as “85 percent lean” or “ground round.”

Country-of-origin labels on ground beef may list all countries from which a plant might typically buy beef over a couple months. For example, a label might say, “Product of U.S., Canada, New Zealand and Australia,” if the company sources its raw material from those countries regularly, or “Product of U.S. and Australia,” if those are the two countries typically providing raw material. Such labels do not mean that the ground beef always includes meat from each one of those countries, but that it may include beef from those countries. In short, the actual blend can and does vary from day to day to enable the product to be sold as inexpensively as possible.

Imported Meats

Consumers are sometimes surprised to learn that the U.S. imports and exports significant amounts of beef, pork and lamb. That’s because different countries, over time, have specialized in the production of certain types of meat. Trade then expands the number of choices available in the global marketplace. Consumers in Asia enjoy American corn-fed beef, while many Americans enjoy grass-fed beef from Argentina or lamb from New Zealand.

In order for meat to be exported to the U.S., the exporting nation must have meat inspection rules and procedures that are equivalent to those in the United States. Facilities that produce meat that is exported to the U.S. also must be certified by the U.S. Department of Agriculture to ensure that they are sanitary and in compliance with U.S. rules. At the border, meat is subject to re-inspection before it is allowed into the U.S. All of these steps ensure safe and abundant choices in the U.S. marketplace.

Final Note

Consumers with questions about country of origin labeling may wish to visit USDA’s website at www.ams.usda.gov.

Sample Labels

PRODUCT OF THE U.S.

U.S. origin label for use when meat comes from livestock born, raised and processed in the U.S.

PRODUCT OF THE U.S., CANADA AND MEXICO

Label for use when animals may have been born in one country, Mexico or Canada for example, and raised and processed in the U.S.

PRODUCT OF CANADA AND THE U.S.

Label for use when livestock are imported from another country and are processed within two weeks

PRODUCT OF NEW ZEALAND

Label for products imported from another country for direct sale to consumers