

DAILY NEWS

Meat labels will include where animal was born and slaughtered, irking Canada and Mexico

By: James Warren – April 3, 2013

If the feds get their way, meats on supermarket shelves will include some unappetizing details, such as where the animal was slaughtered.

Find that stomach-turning?

Better get used to it: Labels on meat products sold in the U.S. could soon read like a sad mini-biography of the ranch-raised beasts.

In a little-known regulatory action that has produced a storm of criticism, the U.S. Department of Agriculture has moved to rework how meats are sold at retailers, including grocery stores, are labeled. Under the Obama administration's plan, meats would have to include labels informing the consumer where the animal was born, raised and slaughtered.

The USDA touts it as a thrust toward transparency that will benefit consumers. But outraged critics, including Canada and Mexico — the leading beef exporters to the U.S. — and retailers themselves, howl that the proposed rules are thinly veiled protectionism.

They argue there is no evidence consumers want such details or that any supposed benefits wouldn't be offset by what industry groups say will be a resulting increase in the cost of meats.

“Do consumers really want the word ‘Slaughtered’ on their meat?” asked Bill Watson, a foreign trade expert at the libertarian Cato Institute. “No. The consumer information argument is pure baloney meant to hide what would otherwise be ridiculously obvious protectionism.”

Many food products contain a label noting country of origin, a regulation stemming from 2002 and 2008 farm bills passed in Congress.

Country-of-origin labeling applies to certain beef, pork, lamb, chicken, goat, fish and shellfish, as well as fruits, vegetables and some nuts.

The Obama administration's new proposals, which it has been trying to implement for a few years — would require labelling changes to roughly 30% of the beef sold in the U.S. and to 11% of all pork products, according to the Congressional Research Service, the research arm of Congress. In a huge exemption, restaurants and other food service providers, such as McDonald's, are not covered.

The Food Marketing Institute, which represents retail giants like Target and single-store

groceries, says the new rules will cost many millions of dollars to implement and result in higher food prices.

Canada and Mexico filed legal objections with the World Trade Organization, arguing that their livestock exporters would be hurt by what they see as a protectionist policy. The U.S. lost the initial judgment and again on appeal.

Following the dual setbacks, the Obama administration has until May 23 to revise the program. Changes have been made, but both Canada and Mexico say the revised regulations would still hurt their livestock exporters.

The two nations are joined by unhappy U.S. livestock and food industry groups, including the prime lobbying group for supermarkets, in alleging that it's all too expensive and unnecessary.

Major U.S. cattle ranchers and consumer groups, however, argue that Americans want to know as much as possible about what they eat.