May 7, 2003

Country of Origin Labeling Program
Agricultural Marketing Service, USDA
Stop 0249, Room 2092-S
1400 Independence Avenue, SW
Washington, D.C. 20250-0249

Mr. William T. Hawks
Under Secretary for Marketing and Regulatory Programs
U.S. Department of Agriculture

Dear Under Secretary Hawks,

I am a concerned consumer writing to urge you to come up with simple, effective guidelines for the mandatory country of origin labeling program, such as those recommended by the Americans for Country of Origin Labeling coalition.

Consumers deserve more information about the food we feed to our families, and where it was produced. This seems even more urgent now, as food safety and disease outbreaks have occurred with disturbing regularity around the world in recent years. Without country of origin labeling, I cannot make an informed decision about what I am buying, and I cannot use my purchasing power to support domestic farmers and producers. I understand that there is much controversy about how to implement mandatory country of origin labeling, and I urge you to keep several points in mind as you develop the rules.

Retailers and packers have already signaled their intent to put a greater burden on suppliers than is required by the Farm Bill. For example, some packers are demanding that producers obtain a third-party certification of origin. This in unnecessary and unfair to small producers who already face enough obstacles. Any labeling program should place a record-keeping burden only on processors/packers and retailers. This can be accomplished by giving the only authority to conduct audits to USDA, and instructing processors and retailers to add country of origin information to existing paperwork transactions.

In addition, USDA should maximize the number of foods that will be labeled. Enhancing a covered product by adding water, flavoring, salt, or other seasoning should not exclude it from the labeling requirements, nor should cooking, curing, or roasting.

In short, I urge you to make sure that the rules for mandatory country of origin labeling live up to their potential, and allow me to know where my food is produced, just as I know where other consumer goods like clothing are produced.

Sincerely,

Sheryl K Rathke