

The Dilemma: COOL or EID Tags?

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We have a dilemma to work through. This past November, Secretary of Agriculture Vilsack announced that USDA will henceforth purchase meat born, raised, and harvested in the USA for their commodity programs. Great news. We hope – pray - that these purchases will prioritize small regional packing plants, thereby enhancing market competition. That would make it doubly good news.

However, how will USDA know that the beef in question was actually born, raised, and harvested in the USA? The easy and best way would be to have country of origin labeling (COOL). The other way would be through source verified electronic (EID) tagging of cattle. Almost all cattle producers, who have thought about it at all, are in favor of COOL. As are 89 percent of consumers. However, many producers are skeptical, if not openly hostile, to mandatory EID tagging.

The political consensus to restore COOL is growing and many of the Representatives and Senators from the western states are sponsors of the American Beef Labeling Act. The problem is that Representative Glenn Thompson (R-PA), chair of the House Ag Committee, is opposed and Senator Debbie Stabenow (D-MI), chair of the Senate Ag Committee, is indifferent.

Without the committee chairs in favor, it is very hard to get anything passed at all. On top of that hurdle is the fact that Congress, particularly the House of Representatives, is spectacularly dysfunctional. Even though they have not been doing their jobs, most everyone in Congress is currently focused on getting reelected in order to protect their positions and privileges.

The reality is that we will not have COOL reinstated until Congress decides to do what we elect them to do. Please don't let my pessimism keep you from fighting for COOL. We have right on our side, we have created a considerable movement demanding COOL, and we shall prevail. Unfortunately, it will take more time and perseverance.

On the other hand, USDA is eager to require that all cattle are identified with source verifying EID tags. They tell us that this is needed to respond to introduced foreign diseases – particularly Foot and Mouth Disease (FMD). Many producers are skeptical and/or hostile of this proposal. They suspect the real reason for the EID mandate is to give the beef packers free source verification.

A number of producers already market through voluntary source verified branded beef programs, and receive a premium for doing so. If we are all required to tag our cattle, that premium will disappear. So, what do we do? If we can't get COOL passed soon, do we resign ourselves to mandatory identification of our cattle in order to have USDA purchase domestically produced beef. This is the dilemma.

USDA has had decades to perfect their proposed identification mandate and yet, the only part that they seem to have come up with is for producers themselves to purchase and install the tags. What happens after that is not at all clear. The Montana Cattlemen's Association (MCA) policy is that if USDA is to mandate EID tags, the government should provide them for free. After all, the stated purpose of the tagging is to respond to and contain introduced foreign diseases. This is a public good and the public should fund it.

In addition, MCA is concerned about how the source verified information is electronically stored, who has access to the information, and under what circumstances is it to be used. USDA is not clear about any of this. If the government is to require an expensive complex cattle identification mandate, it should be fully thought out ahead of time and adequately funded. As it currently stands, the ID mandate looks like a hodge-podge. Will we be paying for tags, year after year after year, and when the time comes to address an introduced disease will the USDA veterinarians be caught flat footed?

We need answers and we need them from the top. It is long past time for Secretary Vilsack to come out to the country and discuss these issues face to face with actual cattle ranchers and feeders.