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Opinion

COOL is the next best thing to building a wall

By J. Patrick Boyle



Patrick Boyle

You've got to hand it to our nation's protectionist groups for the rhetorical shape shifting they use to dissuade consumers from buying foreign products. They offer a daily dose of anti-import claims to match the day's headlines. One day, they argue that foreign products are unsafe, while the next day, they say that buying foreign products destroys tropical rainforests.

But now, instead of arguing theory, they are championing a real - but misguided law - saying it's the key to a safer food supply. I'm talking about the 2002 Farm Bill's version of mandatory country-of-origin labeling - a law that begs for repeal or repair. In reading a recent guest opinion piece by R-CALF

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that ran in this newspaper, it's clear they don't let the facts get in the way of their arguments in support of this costly government mandate.

They claim that a long label detailing where an animal was born, raised and slaughtered somehow makes meat safer. Not surprisingly, an impressive group of prominent experts disagrees. From a former secretary of agriculture to numerous congressmen to one of the Senate authors of the 2002 Farm Bill's COOL language, all say that these labels offer no food-safety benefits.

The fear the protectionists peddle in their arguments is a disservice to everyone. And claims that every country in the Western Hemisphere, except the U.S., has COOL, ignores the fact that the U.S., Canada, and Mexico all had mandatory country-of-origin labeling on the books well before the 2002 Farm Bill was passed. None of them, however, has had the "born, raised and slaughtered" version of COOL included in that farm bill. Unfortunately for the meat-consuming, producing, and processing public, this costly and absurd labeling law takes effect in 2008 - and so will associated cost increases.

All of the arguments we have seen are an attempt to hide the real reason this law was included in the last farm bill: to block imports. The reality is that this form of COOL is an unfair, illegal non-tariff trade barrier. In fact, it's the Cadillac of trade barriers for those in the U.S. who are afraid of foreign competition. They hope the tracking, segregating, and labeling of different meat products will cause domestic packers to reject livestock or meat with a foreign heritage. But will our trading partners simply sit back and continue to import our goods while we build walls to keep their products out? Not likely.

The protectionists' short-sighted approach to limiting competition is sure to invite well-justified trade complaints under the World Trade Organization and the North American Free Trade Agreement. Indeed, COOL included in the 2002 Farm Bill is likely to put us at odds with key allies and trading partners who happen to buy a lot of agricultural commodities from us.

But set aside COOL-fueled trade wars for a moment. The farm bill version of COOL will hurt at home, too, because it will foist unwanted and unnecessary food price hikes onto consumers who have never indicated they care to know, or are willing to pay for, information about the travel history of the meat they eat. In fact, a poll from the International Food Information Council shows that, when asked what they care about when looking at a food label, less than two percent of consumers responded that they cared about a product's country of origin. That means consumers will pay for information that most of them find irrelevant. A lot more.

The retail grocery industry calculated that COOL for seafood - already in effect -- has cost 10 times more to implement than USDA estimated. So while livestock producers and meat processors reel from higher input costs associated with rising corn prices, they'll have to weather a second economic hit triggered by a law that makes meat, but not poultry, more expensive. It takes little imagination to see consumers shifting away from red meat purchases and toward other proteins because of COOL-inspired price increases.

Those who want to torpedo trade will always come up with the new reason du jour as to why we shouldn't buy foreign products. What they either fail to realize, or willingly ignore, is that most of the world's consumers - about 90 percent of them - live outside the United States. The key to the future success of American agriculture is to sell more products to that 90 percent. Making our products unnecessarily more expensive, while simultaneously antagonizing our trading partners and customers, is a recipe for reduced - not expanded exports. And it's a recipe for higher prices and reduced meat consumption.

The shape shifters can change their arguments with the day's news, but the damage to our nation's meat and livestock industries and to consumers' pocketbooks will be permanent.

J. Patrick Boyle is president of the American Meat Institute.

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