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For Information, contact: Burt Rutherford at TCFA (800) 299-8232
Crystal Bryant at TSCRA (800) 242-7820

TEXAS CATTLE GROUPS SUPPORT WASHINGTON ACTIONS ON COOL

Saying "We will not jump blindly—we must consider all implications and make an educated decision," Congressman Henry Bonilla (R-Texas), chairman of the House Subcommittee on Agriculture Appropriations, today marked up the Fiscal 2004 Ag Appropriations bill and included a provision that restricts USDA from implementing the mandatory country of origin labeling (COOL) labeling law until Sept. 30, 2005.

In related action, Congressman Bob Goodlatte (R-Va.), chairman of the House Ag Committee, today called a hearing on the COOL law for Tuesday, June 24.

"It's essential that we provide time for Congress to properly evaluate this issue," Bonilla said. "That's exactly what my Subcommittee intends to do and I am thankful that the House Agriculture Committee shares our concern and has decided to hold hearings on it."

"We thank Chairmen Bonilla and Goodlatte for their leadership in addressing a law that has caused frustration and controversy throughout the beef cattle industry," said Bob McCan, president of the Texas and Southwestern Cattle Raisers Association (TSCRA) in Fort Worth and Scott Keeling, chairman of the Amarillo-based Texas Cattle Feeders Association (TCFA).

"This law was adopted as part of the 2002 Farm Bill without adequate debate on cost and benefits. We're pleased that Chairman Goodlatte will begin a formal Congressional review of the law next week and that Chairman Bonilla has taken decisive legislative action to more fully understand the implications of this law on the various segments of the beef industry—from producer to consumer," McCan said.

"We have concerns about the economic burden that mandatory COOL will place on beef producers," Keeling added.

Food service establishments—fast food, restaurants, etc.—are exempt from the law. In addition, poultry as well as processed beef are exempt from labeling, meaning beef's major competitor will not have to suffer the economic burden, yet only about 20% of the beef imported into the U.S. will ultimately be labeled as to its origin, Keeling said. "However, in order to ensure compliance with the law, cow-calf producers, stocker operators and feeders will be required to maintain extensive, auditable record keeping systems."

Given the burdensome costs that will be associated with COOL, going forward with COOL at this time is premature, TCFA and TSCRA say. "The long-term implications of mandatory COOL are too important to be considered anywhere other than through a full Congressional debate. The opportunity for hearings and actions taken by Chairmen Bonilla and Goodlatte are an opportunity to work through the issues that exist with the law and work to discern the true implications of the law."

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