

## Peterson looks for consensus on COOL

Dan Looker  
Successful Farming magazine Business Editor  
Agriculture Online  
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House Agriculture Committee Chairman Collin Peterson (D-MN) talks these days of keeping different commodity groups and regional interests "equally unhappy," with parts of the new farm bill taking shape in Washington.

One area where he's succeeding is the subject of mandatory Country of Origin Labeling for meats and fresh produce. Peterson said flatly Tuesday that he doesn't want the issue carried over into the new law. He wants the provision from the 2002 law, which has been delayed by Congress until September 30, 2008, to take effect, with some refinements.

Peterson said that he has told livestock producers and packing industry groups that oppose COOL that it won't be delayed any longer.

"I've told them, that mandatory labeling of fruits and vegetables and meats will be implemented by 2008. It's going to happen," Peterson told reporters Thursday.

At the same time, some members of Congress and farm groups want COOL to kick in late this year. Peterson has said on several occasions that he doesn't think it's possible to come up with workable rules to administer COOL that quickly.

"I think everyone's reached the conclusion that's not a realistic option at this point," Peterson said.

Peterson said that it's not just meat packers who oppose mandatory COOL. He said that he has talked to Minnesota hog producers who buy Canadian feeder pigs and Texas cattle feeders who import Mexican feeder calves. "They think that if this is implemented the way it is, it's going to eliminate their business," Peterson said.

He also said that the complexities of trying to label hamburger might put smaller meat packers out of business.

"You could have the perverse effect of consolidating the industry even more," he said.

So earlier this week, Peterson sent out a letter to livestock industry groups asking them to join "an industry stakeholder process to address country of origin labeling for meat sold at retail."

"We believe there is an opportunity to refine the current law prior to its scheduled enactment on September 30, 2008," Peterson wrote. "Our intent is to utilize the input of key stakeholders in an effort to reach a solution, similar to the consensus building process utilized to enact and subsequently reauthorize the Livestock Mandatory Reporting Act of 1999."

Peterson said that some people in the livestock industry won't talk to each other about this issue.

"I've been trying to force some process where they would talk to one another and come up with a resolution," he said.

The letter was also signed by the ranking Republican on his committee, Rep. Bob Goodlatte (R-VA) and Senator Saxby Chambliss (R-GA). Senate Ag Committee chairman Tom Harkin did not sign the letter.

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