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New law puts a label on fresh meat

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By **MARK MUCKENFUSS**

The Press-Enterprise

There will be no more mystery meat.

Or, at least, a lot less of it.

A new federal regulation goes into effect today requiring packaged fresh meats to bear a country-of-origin label, much like the labels Californians are used to seeing on a lot of the produce and seafood they buy.



Stan Lim / The Press-Enterprise John Fouch picks out a couple of steaks at Gerrard's Market, where most meat carried country-of-origin labels before today when the new law went into effect.

Nancy Matis, 55, said she would pay attention to the labeling, although she didn't want to have any additional cost passed along to her and other consumers.

"It's not a bad idea," said Matis while shopping at Gerrard's Market in her hometown of Redlands. "I like to feed my family the healthiest I can. If there's a problem with (a particular) country, I try to avoid it. I'd buy U.S. We have a little stricter controls."

The labeling law applies to supermarkets and large food retailers. Restaurants, schools and small food retailers, such as butcher shops, are exempt from the regulation, as are processed foods. The law was passed by Congress in 2002 but twice delayed in its implementation.

Most Produce Tagged

Produce is also affected by the law, but Matt McInerney, executive vice president of the Newport Beach-based Western Growers Association, said as much as 70 percent of produce already carries country-of-origin information on stickers, ties or packaging.

"I think the produce industry has been very diligent in looking at effective and efficient ways of (origin) labeling," McInerney said.

Consumers should start noticing origin signs on the bin labels for bulk produce such as green beans and loose potatoes.

The big change, however, will be in meat labeling, said Elisa Nobel, a spokeswoman for the California Farm Bureau Federation. The group represents both produce and livestock growers.



Country-of-origin labels, like the ones at Gerrard's Market in Redlands, are required on meat packaging as of today.

"It will definitely have more of an impact for meat because there aren't currently labels as there are on fruits and vegetables," Nobel said. "There will be more of an impact on suppliers and retailers."

Even so, she said, her organization has long advocated such labeling.

"We consider this a victory," she said. "We've been a proponent of country-of-origin labeling for quite a while. We believe that California farmers and ranchers produce the safest quality of food in the world. Most consumers realize that as well."

More Than One Country?

Some of the labels may still leave consumers guessing. Nobel gave the example of beef that might be born in Mexico, raised in the United States and grazed during the summer in Canada before being slaughtered.

"The label can say, 'Product of the U.S., Mexico and Canada,' " she said. "A lot of that animal movement will continue. (But) if there is a larger demand for strictly U.S.-produced meat, I think the market might respond. We're giving consumers the opportunity to choose."

With the exception of lamb, which often comes from New Zealand and Australia, very little meat is imported to the U.S. from countries other than Canada and Mexico, said industry experts.

Tom Reingrover is co-owner of Gerrard's Market. He said most of the meat in his store already carries a country-of-origin label.



Stan Lim / The Press-Enterprise Beef might be born in Mexico, raised in the United States and grazed in Canada before slaughter.

"We've taken extra steps to make sure 100 percent of our beef is U.S. beef," Reingrover said. "I'm not saying there's anything wrong with beef that comes from Canada or Mexico, but consumers feel uncomfortable. I personally think this is a big deal."

Reingrover said that prior to labeling, he often had customers ask about where the meat in his cases came from.

"A lot of customers are becoming more health-oriented," he said. "They want to know what the cattle were eating, whether they were grass-fed or grain-fed."

Prejudices Linger

Reingrover thinks that certain prejudices he's noticed in his customers' produce habits may carry over to their meat purchases.

"Chilean produce has been pretty much accepted," he said. "The thing that gets customers is produce from Mexico. That's why I feel when you have to start labeling meat from Mexico, it's going to get people's attention."

Calls for comment to the Inland region's major supermarket chains were not returned.

Laura Humphrey, 64, of Riverside, said she will be paying attention to the new labels.

"It's nice to know where it came from," she said. "How bad is it in other countries? I don't know. I would probably be more inclined to buy United States meat. We've been warned not to eat anything from China."

If she can't find meat she feels safe eating, she'd have no problem become a vegetarian, she said.

"Just give me a cheese sandwich," she said. "But I can't even eat cheese if it comes from China."

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