

23 October 2012

Committee Secretary
Senate Standing Committees on Rural and Regional Affairs and
Transport
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600
Australia

Re: Competition and Consumer Amendment (Australian Food
Labelling) Bill 2012 (No. 2)

Dear Sir / Madam,

I have been alerted by an email circulated by Genethics that Senator Christine Milne has introduced a bill to review country of origin labeling laws.

This is an issue about which I think every time I go shopping, which is usually three or four times a week, so it is never far from my mind. I am married to a farmer, and grew up on a farm, so similarly, issues pertaining to primary production are close to my heart.

I have found that the current labeling laws are ridiculous, misleading and ineffective. "Made in Australia from local and imported ingredients" is a weak catch-all that gives no real meaning to the contents. For example, you try and find a tin of tomatoes that states Product of Australia. Yet we all imagine that tinned tomatoes are grown somewhere in Australia. Most of them state that they are Made in Australia ... but I have no way of knowing if that means the tomatoes are imported or not.

Made in Australia from local and imported product gives no indication of which portion comes from Australia and which portion is imported. I don't mind if the tomatoes are Australian and the acidity regulator (whatever that unnecessary little ingredient is) is imported, but I DO mind if I am unwittingly buying Chinese tomatoes and Australian acidity regulator.

One reason is to support local farmers, but another is also to support appropriate trade; it is a fine line, I suppose, but I don't mind buying kiwifruit from NZ, both because they are in similar position to us, but also because they produce kiwifruit well. I don't mind buying bean thread noodles from say Vietnam, because they produce them well. I don't mind buying rice from Thailand, because Thailand produces rice well. Similarly they are appropriate to transport because they have a long shelf life and particularly rice is relatively heavy so makes good use of container space. Going back to the example of tomatoes, buying Italian tomatoes makes me a little uneasy because they travel such a long way, but at least the Italians tin them without any additives! Maple syrup is another good example – it only comes from Canada / N America, so it has traveled a long way, but there is no real alternative, if I decide that I really do want it. Maple syrup is interesting for its contrast too, it is always labeled clearly, obviously because in this case the country of origin is perceived as a marketing advantage.

Another reason why I particularly like to know where the product comes from is that I simply do not trust the regulators etc in some countries, for example, can you really imagine that a country with the population and pressures of China can adequately monitor primary production to ensure that it meets our expectations? I can see that this has the potential to be an inflammatory subject, but it is naïve to imagine that their production techniques are always what we imagine they should be. I don't mean to imply that they should go and redouble their efforts to reassure us, but how about using the laws to support our own farmers – charity begins in the home.

I really resent having to search among the supermarket shelves for Australian grown produce, and find it shocking that we cannot produce frozen vegetables competitively, and consequently I can buy vegetables that are better traveled than me. Spinach from Belgium or somewhere like that!? These are not always products from unknown companies or house brands, sometimes these are products from well known companies that I have bought in the past, and upon re-reading the label I find that they have changed the description of the contents so that I can no longer be certain that I know what I am buying.

This issue is inevitably linked with surrounding issues, such as globalised trade, and the sale of major industry to foreign interests. None of the major brands of sugar are Australian owned any more, although they happily state that they are Product of Australia – which they rightly are, but there is no information which alerts us to the fact that the profits now head offshore. Globalisation has allowed the supermarkets to stock the cheapest products (they say because the shopper demands it- well not this shopper!!), with the result that even beetroot now comes from goodness knows where, while the Australian beetroot growers have been cut out of the market, and there are few remaining.

When I go shopping, at least I have the option of reading the labels like a fanatic. When we go and buy pizza, a hamburger, or any other take-away or restaurant fare, I can be sure that the majority choose their ingredients based upon price, not country of origin, in part because that information is so darned hard to find, not to say incomplete.

Product of Australia labels are fewer and further between on the shelves, partly because of the hopeless laws that were put in place a few years ago – who on earth could have dreamed up such pathetic stuff but politicians and multinationals??

New laws MUST be put in place to streamline the situation, which give consumers enough information to make an informed decision.

If a label states Made in Australia, it must also state what ingredients come from Australia, and which are imported. Simple as that. Who cares if the manufacturers complain? Nearly all the manufacturers are foreign anyway, so this just means that maybe a little less profit heads offshore. Who are the laws there for – the manufacturer or the consumer??

Yours sincerely,

Mia Pithie