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Committee Secretary
House of Representatives Standing Committee on Agriculture and Industry
PO Box 6021
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Sir, Madam

Country of Origin Labelling for food

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to the Standing Committee's inquiry into Australia's Country of Origin Labelling system for food.

As consumer awareness and demand for more humanely farmed animal-derived food products grows, consumers need to be able to make an informed choice about the products they purchase. However, product information on the conditions under which the animal was farmed is either lacking or provided through ambiguous labelling.

The issue of inconsistent labelling extends across all animal-derived food products - both domestic and imported - and needs to be addressed.

The Committee will be aware of terminology used to denote the production method of eggs, e.g. 'cage', 'barn laid', 'free range', 'open range', 'range', and 'grain fed'. Terms to indicate production method of meat products include 'grain fed', 'free range', 'bred free-range', 'organic' and 'biodynamic', to name a few.

These terms may also be used on imported products and for Australian consumers it is difficult, if not impossible, to verify the claims made on pack; leading to increasing consumer confusion and uncertainty. What is required for both domestic and imported products are definitions that plainly and unambiguously describe the housing system provided and the range of conditions under which the animals have lived.

Current Country of Origin Labelling is not sufficient for the consumer to be able to compare production methods between domestic and imported product.

Current Country of Origin Labelling - particularly where it is permissible to use the term "local and imported" to describe product ingredients - also does not allow the consumer to compare production methods between countries. Each country of origin must be clearly stated on the product label to allow fair comparison.

Consistent labelling provides Australian producers with an opportunity to differentiate their product and attract a growing number of discerning consumers looking to purchase more humanely farmed foods. However, Australian producers need to be able to work from a level playing field that ensures imported products meet the same production standards as required in Australia.

RSPCA Australia Inc.

ABN 99 668 654 249
ARBN 163 614 668

P 02 6282 8300
F 02 6282 8311
E rspca@rspca.org.au
W rspca.org.au

PO Box 265
Deakin West ACT 2600



Put simply, for example, imported pork labelled 'free range' must meet the same standards of production as required for Australian pork labelled 'free range'. In addition, and until such time as consistent definitions for production method labelling exist, product labels need to clearly inform the consumer about the production practices adhered to.

The way animals have been slaughtered is just as important as production method. Standard practice in Australia requires that the animal is stunned prior to slaughter. However, this cannot be said for all countries from which Australia imports animal-derived food products. The RSPCA believes that all such products should be clearly labelled so that consumers are able to exercise choice and avoid meat that does not adhere to standard slaughter practices expected by the Australian community.

The result of successful labelling schemes is increased consumer confidence in the animal-derived food they purchase and, as demand grows for animal-welfare friendly products, an increase in the level of animal welfare in the livestock production sectors, the key objective of the RSPCA.

Sincerely

Heather Neil
Chief Executive Officer
RSPCA Australia