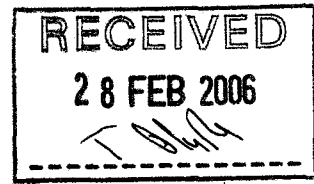


Clarke A (Tony)

From: Sue Davies [Sue.Davies@which.co.uk]
Sent: 27 February 2006 17:46
To: Country of Origin of Beef
Cc: Julia Clarke
Subject: Response from Which?



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Please find attached Which?'s response to the consultation on country of origin of beef in the food service sector. *OK for release.*

Many thanks,
Sue Davies
<<Scottish Executive beef origin consultation 27.2.06.doc>>

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Kids' food campaign

We're calling for an end to irresponsible marketing of unhealthy foods to children. Join our campaign. www.which.co.uk/kids-food

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Consultation response: Country of Origin of Beef in the Food Service Sector

Country of Origin Consultation
Mail Point R259
Pentland house
47 Robb's Loan
Edinburgh EH14 1TY

DATE: 27 February 2006
TO: Elizabeth Baird
RESPONSE BY: Sue Davies, Chief Policy Adviser,
Sue.Davies@which.co.uk
020 7770 7274

General comments

Thank you for offering Which? the opportunity to comment on the proposal to require country of origin labelling of beef in the food service sector in Scotland.

Which? welcomes this initiative given the evidence, as outlined in the consultation document, that consumers are increasingly interested in the origin of their food. While there are a range of reasons why consumers may wish to know the origin of their food including beef, such as safety or quality considerations, we support the general recognition that this information should be provided to ensure that consumer are informed and that they are not misled.

While consumer interest in country of origin labelling is not limited to beef, we believe that this is a useful starting point and that beef origin is likely to be of particular concern to many consumers. As outlined, the provisions within existing EU legislation for origin labelling of pre-packaged beef under the Beef Labelling Regulations (EC Regulation 1760/2000) also make it relatively straightforward and sensible to extend the provision to the food service sector, as some other countries have done, providing valuable consumer information.

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Specific issues raised in the consultation document

Why change?

1. Do you consider that the current requirements provide adequate information to consumers of beef in the food service sector?

Consumers are currently unlikely to be provided with information about the origin of their beef when eating out unless this information is provided voluntarily. We have welcomed the Meat and Livestock Commission's best practice guidelines which encourage caterers to provide information about the origin of meat to consumers. The surveys referred to in the consultation document also highlight that many consumers are interested in knowing about the origin of beef. We believe that they many people are also likely to be interested in knowing the origin of meat in general.

2. Do you consider that the absence of country of origin information confuses consumers about the source of beef in the food service sector?

It is also important to address the second issue highlighted in the consultation document which is the potential for consumers to be misled about the country of origin, for example, to assume that it is of UK or Scottish origin when this may not be the case. While the Food Labelling Regulations 1996 require country of origin information to be provided for pre-packed foods where its absence would be misleading, there is an exemption in the regulations for the food service sector for non-pre-packed foods or food pre-packed on the premises. If a restaurant or other outlet described its beef as Aberdeen Angus, there would not therefore be any requirement to provide clarification if it was produced outside of Scotland, or even outside the UK. It is therefore important to address the potential for consumers to be misled in this way.

3. If you consider that the current requirements are not adequate, do you favour a voluntary or compulsory scheme to indicate country of origin of beef in the food sector?

If the issues raised above are to be addressed, it is important that the food service sector as a whole provides this information. We consider that this is unlikely to be achieved on a voluntary basis. While it is likely that those in the food-service sector who wish to market their meat on the basis of its origin would provide this information, others would be unlikely to do so. The issue of consumers potentially being misled about the origin of their meat is also unlikely to be addressed on a voluntary basis as it is doubtful that those marketing their beef on the basis of it

being 'Aberdeen Angus', for example, would want to make it clear if this was not Scottish Aberdeen Angus unless required to do so.

Nature of proposal

4. Do you agree with the proposed approach?

We agree that in line with the Beef Labelling Regulations, the requirement should apply to dishes made from fresh, chilled or frozen beef, but not to processed beef or products containing beef. This is not because we do not think that consumers would be interested in having this information, but because we appreciate that it would be much more difficult for caterers to provide this information. However, it is important that any statements informing consumers about the origin of beef make it clear that this information does not extend to these products. It may be that some outlets may wish to provide additional information about these products on a voluntary basis.

We agree that the requirement should apply to all food service sector outlets, but that this should not include occasional events by those who are providing beef on a non-commercial basis. However, the organisers of such events may still wish to provide this information on a voluntary basis.

If the beef comes from animals which are born, reared and slaughtered in one country then clearly that should be stated as the origin. If the beef comes from animals that have moved through a number of countries then the information provided should be as honest and as specific about the geographical area as possible. The same principle should apply in relation to describing the beef as of UK or Scottish origin. It is essential that very clear guidance on how to indicate the origin depending on the circumstances accompanies the legislation to avoid any confusion and prevent consumers from being misled through inconsistent labelling.

More broadly, we consider that it would be helpful to consumers if the requirement to provide information about origin where there is the potential for consumers to be misled if it is not should be extended to the food service sector for non-prepacked food or food prepacked on the premises. There potential for consumers to be misled does not change merely because the food is not packaged.

We agree that the information should be provided by the means preferred by the outlet (for example, on the menu, a poster or a blackboard) as long as this is clearly visible and understandable to the consumer.

5. Do you consider that the requirement should be applied to veal as well as to beef?

Ideally we would like to see this approach extended to all meat if the food service sector is in a position to provide this information. As veal is included within the Beef Labelling Regulations, the food service sector should already be in a position to provide information about its origin or to obtain it from suppliers. Provision of origin information for other meat should be encouraged on a voluntary basis.

6. Do you agree with the proposals for monitoring and enforcement?

We agree that monitoring and enforcement should be carried out by Environmental Health Officers in a way that is proportionate. It would also be useful to review the implementation of these provisions after a set period of time from their introduction such as 3 years. This would enable the Executive to assess whether the legislation was addressing the concerns that it was intended to deal with and give a true picture of the level of implementation. This may not otherwise be possible if the advice to local authorities is merely to investigate complaints rather than any active monitoring.

7. Do you agree that a civil action would be appropriate?

We agree that the proposed option of introducing scope for civil action sounds a sensible and proportionate approach if this had the effect of enabling the local authority to impose a fine if there was failure to comply. It would also enable the person concerned to appeal.

Conclusion

Overall we support this initiative and the way that it is proposed to apply the proposal. We hope that our comments are helpful. We would be happy to discuss them in more detail if that would be helpful.

We have copied our comments to Richard Harding and Alette Addison at the Food Standards Agency (UK) as we believe that this is a positive initiative that could be applied UK-wide.

Which?
February 2006