Myth: It will be prohibitively expensive to tell consumers what country their food comes from.

Fact: A provision of the 2002 Farm Bill requires grocery stores to identify what country beef, pork, lamb, fish, shellfish, fruits, vegetables and peanuts originated from.

This law, called “Country of Origin Labeling” (COOL) took effect on Sept. 30, 2004. It would provide consumers the same information they get when they buy, say, a shirt or a car.

The USDA has estimated that the first-year paperwork burden on industry would cost almost $2 billion alone. That’s a hugely inflated figure, concludes a paper published by the University of Florida’s Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences.

The analysis concluded that in some cases the USDA overestimated the various costs of COOL by 95 percent. A more realistic estimate for labeling costs is between $70 million and $193 million, say the paper’s authors, who are agricultural economists and agricultural law experts. “The costs and complexity of labeling have been overblown, often to absurd levels,” they write. Several reasons for the USDA’s inaccurate figures are cited by the analysis, including the agency’s assumption that it would cost farmers more to keep records than prior experience with labeling programs has shown.

In August, the U.S. General Accounting Office (GAO), a nonpartisan investigative arm of Congress, issued a report that concluded the USDA’s cost estimates were “questionable and not well supported.” Again, said the GAO, USDA developed its estimates based on assumptions that record keeping would cost much more than normal, and failed to provide reasons for the inflated estimates.

More Information