



## **Resolution Notes for 2010 AGM**

*This meeting urges HM Government to introduce clear and mandatory country of origin labelling on all meat, poultry and fish products sold in this country.*

This year's AGM will debate the issue of food labelling, following overwhelming support from members voting for the shortlist.

Please use these notes to inform your research to ensure all WIs cast an informed vote at the AGM.

***Title of Resolution:*** The mandatory clear labelling of food with true country of origin

***Wording of Resolution:*** This meeting urges HM Government to introduce clear and mandatory country of origin labelling on all meat, poultry and fish products sold in this country.

***Proposer's position:*** Unclear and misleading information on packaging denies consumers the chance to make an informed choice when purchasing goods.

***Outline of issue:***

Under present legislation food products (with a few exceptions including fresh beef, veal and fish) do not have to carry a country of origin label unless not doing so would mislead customers.

Additionally under EU legislation the “country of origin” is the country where a product undertook its last “significant change”. This means a pork pie can be labelled as British if it was made into a pie in Britain, even if the pork it contains comes from pigs born, reared and slaughtered elsewhere.

Retailers also use British branding to create the impression that a product is “British” and therefore supporting British farmers. This is allowed under current legislation even if it contains imported meat. Examples include ready meals marketed as “Great British Classics” but containing foreign meat.

There is an incentive for UK retailers to pass off foreign meat as British. British meat tends to be more expensive because of the UK’s higher animal welfare standards. This makes it difficult for British farmers to compete on price alone and they have to promote other incentives, such as quality, for consumers to buy British. This requires accurate labelling.

The Food Standards Agency has produced guidance for retailers and manufacturers that says meat should only be labelled as British if the animals were born, reared and slaughtered in the UK. If not products should be labelled as “made in Britain with meat from country x”. Retailers do not have to adhere to this guidance, but some supermarkets have already taken steps to avoid misleading labels.

In March 2009 a committee of MEPs backed a report calling for clearer country of origin labelling across Europe and this is expected to form the basis for new EU law. Brussels is now debating proposals to achieve this, including closing the loophole that classifies the “country of origin” as the country where the last significant change took place. It would require processed meat products to be labelled as “made in Britain with imported products” if the meat ingredients were not British. The final proposals are yet to be agreed on but are not expected to make country of origin labelling a mandatory requirement on all products.

In the UK the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has also pledged to improve product labelling. In March 2010 the secretary of state announced that the major supermarkets and some restaurant chains have signed up to a voluntary Code of Conduct on country of origin labelling for pork products. This will make it clear if the meat in processed products and sandwiches is of foreign origin by adopting the “made in the UK with meat from country x” formula. Supermarkets have also agreed not to use British branding on products if they are not made with British pork.

## Mandatory versus voluntary

All progress to date has focused on voluntary moves by retailers. The resolution would make country of origin labelling a legal requirement for all products.

Manufacturers of processed products oppose mandatory labelling as they argue it is unrealistic because of their complex supply chains. Processed foods are often made with meat sourced from several countries, often changing at the last minute to accommodate health scares, the weather, changes in demand and so forth. Packaging in comparison is often printed months in advance and cannot reflect rapid and frequent changes.

The UK government has also resisted mandatory labelling to date, arguing it would be illegal under present EU law and excessive. The Conservatives dispute this, however, and claim it is legally possible. The Conservatives have said that if the forthcoming EU law retains voluntary labelling they will legislate to make country of origin labelling a legal requirement in the UK.

The National Farmers Union (NFU) is calling for mandatory labelling and is lobbying MEPs in Brussels to include this in the final legislation. They argue this will provide better protection for British farmers. Which? also argues that making it a legal requirement to display the country of origin would provide better information for consumers.

### ***Arguments for the resolution:***

- There is consumer demand for clearer labelling. 87 per cent of people told a poll commissioned by the Conservative party that the government should ensure that the country of origin is clearly displayed on food.
- Despite this, the industry is sceptical that consumers really care about country of origin labelling. Adopting this resolution would show it is a key issue for shoppers.
- Examples of misleading packaging are readily available suggesting this is a genuine problem for consumers. A campaign could focus on clearly identifiable problems with the current system.
- Lack of clear and accurate labelling prevents customers making informed choices. There are many reasons why individuals may want to know the country of origin of their meat, fish or poultry, including standards of animal welfare, hygiene and the impact that foodstuffs from particular countries can have on the environment and climate change (for example beef from the Amazon).
- It would build on the NFWI's links with British farmers and highlight the reasons why people buy British and the challenges facing the British meat industry.
- In calling for mandatory country of origin labelling the resolution goes further than many of the proposals already being explored, which focus on voluntary improvements.

### ***Arguments against the resolution:***

- The EU Commission is debating new EU-wide legalisation on country of origin labelling. This is likely to address many of the key problems with the current system.
- DEFRA has agreed a voluntary code of conduct with the major UK supermarkets that address many of the concerns of the resolution.
- There are already a number of high profile campaigns on the issue which appear to be having an effect on the industry.

- The resolution would make clear country of origin labelling a legal requirement. There are industry concerns that this is too stringent and the voluntary schemes should be tested first.
- The introduction of mandatory food labelling requirements for foods sold in the UK may impose significantly higher costs on producers and retailers wishing to sell produce into the UK market, where this is not a requirement for other countries.

***Existing campaigns on the issue:***

- 'Why Farming Matters' – The NFU is campaigning for a sustainable and thriving farming industry in Britain. As part of the campaign it is calling for mandatory country of origin labelling to help British farmers promote their products.
- 'Jamie Saves Our Bacon' – Celebrity chef Jamie Oliver has been campaigning for more awareness about the British pig industry, including the value of the UK's higher animal welfare standards. A key part of this is the call for clear and honest country of origin label to promote British pork.
- 'Honest Food' – launched by the Conservatives and supported by organisations such as the NFU, Women's Food and Farming Union, Compassion in World Farming, British Poultry Council, National Pig Association and RSPCA, and food celebrities including Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall, Anthony Worrall Thompson, Rick Stein, and Clarissa Dickson Wright.

***Groups to contact for further info:***

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