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Ranch Groups Make Claim for Summary Judgment in Suit to Return USDA Country-of-Origin Labeling

Spokane, WA: On Tuesday, independent, domestic rancher groups R-CALF USA and the Cattle Producers of Washington (CPoW) made arguments in a pivotal hearing on their lawsuit to reinstate a section of the recently repealed Country-of-Origin Labeling law that required beef and pork imported from foreign countries to retain their origin labels all the way to the consumer. The argument for granting summary judgment took place in the U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of Washington in Spokane, Wash.

The suit alleges that the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) is knowingly violating U.S. law by not requiring meatpackers to carry forward the country-of-origin labels that are on the packages and containers when meat is imported, so that origin information is passed along to consumers rather than stripped off the products. The plaintiffs allege that this allows multinational meatpackers to reclassify foreign meat as a domestic product even if all the meatpackers do is unwrap and rewrap the imported product.

Muraskin argued yesterday that the court should undo this unlawful labeling regime by compelling the USDA to comply with Congress's plain directive that USDA should enforce the import labeling laws—the same laws that apply to all other products— on beef and pork. This will have the effect of allowing R-CALF USA and CPoW's members to receive increased compensation for their cattle when they can market their product exclusively as being a product of the U.S.A. The defendants in the case are also seeking summary judgment in their favor.

This lawsuit is part of a wider movement in favor of reversing government policies that benefit multinational agribusiness at the expense of independent food producers and the integrity of the market. Earlier this year, Public Justice, R-CALF USA, and allied consumer rights groups delivered the signatures of 37,299 Americans demanding that the Commerce Department, and the Trump Administration more generally, follow through on the campaign promise to create a level playing field for independent domestic livestock producers through increasing transparency for consumers. These signatories have asked that Commerce Secretary Wilbur Ross make Country-of-Origin Labeling (COOL) a part of the administration's trade policies.

Public Justice pursues high impact lawsuits to combat social and economic injustice, protect the Earth's sustainability, and challenge predatory corporate conduct and government abuses.

R-CALF USA (*Ranchers-Cattlemen Action Legal Fund, United Stockgrowers of America*) is the largest producer-only cattle trade association in the United States. It is a national, nonprofit organization dedicated to ensuring the continued profitability and viability of the U.S. cattle industry.

Attorneys representing the ranch groups include David S. Muraskin, a Food Safety and Health Attorney at Public Justice; Beth E. Terrell and Blythe H. Chandler of Terrell Marshall Law Group; and J. Dudley Butler of Butler Farm & Ranch Law Group, PLLC.