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# From the flock

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MONTHLY NEWSLETTER FOR THE CANADIAN SHEEP INDUSTRY

## West Hawk Lake Zoning - Gearing Up The Monitoring Operations

By Ann Boyda, Canadian Animal Health Coalition

After successfully completing the preliminary testing of the **West Hawk Lake Zone Monitoring System & Pilot**, the Canadian Zoning Committee is getting ready to gear-up operations for full implementation!

**The West Hawk Lake (WHL) Zoning Initiative**, a collaborative project by industry and government, is establishing zone monitoring capabilities. Key information regarding animal movement across this WHL site contributes to Canada's global reputation for delivery of safe, high-quality food. The uniqueness of the WHL location lends itself to the credibility of Canada's ability to manage animal disease risk in the geographic regions [west & east]. Recording information [premises identification for where animals are picked up and unloaded; animal species, quantities, tags/ tattoos where available, date and time of loading and unloading; license plate number of cargo carrying unit (trailer/truck)] demonstrates our capability to manage a border.

**Renewed interest in regionalization** is opening possibilities for looking at disease prevention and emergency preparedness in new ways. Canadian Food Inspection Agency announced on June 18th, 2008:

*"Discussions continue on a regular basis between Regional Evaluation Services of USDA-APHIS and the Epidemiology and Surveillance Section of CFIA on enhancing zone recognition. We have agreed upon a draft Terms of Reference for the project and will be proceeding with compiling the necessary data to enable mutual evaluation of each country's ability to zone for foreign animal disease. Zoning continues to be discussed at various international fora, such as the Quadilateral Countries Surveillance Working Group and the US-Canada Cross-Border Working Group."*

**What has been tested?** The WHL Zoning project has seen the successful development of a zone monitoring module within an existing animal identification system (CCIA-Canadian Livestock Tracking System) as well as testing of the data collection process, the system functionality and participant acceptability. As of the end of June, 30 loads of cattle, approximately 50 loads of sheep & goats, 9 loads of hogs and several loads of horses, had been permitted.

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## West Hawk Lake Zoning continued

July saw the assessment of the system for accuracy, ease of use, suitability, reliability and security. In response to the testing and participant feedback, several recommendations have emerged to improve the data collection process and acceptability. Modifications to the process are underway.

**What's now in the horizon?** In response to the Piloting of the WHL Zoning System:

- Information packages are being developed to convey the importance of this project and provide simple instructions on how to comply with the information needs. A user guide for use of the internet site to generate permits is now available. Frequently asked questions and answer fact sheets are being developed.
- A technology incentive plan has been developed to provide producers with facility level assistance.
- A training program is finalized which will see the WHL personnel assisting all senders & receivers to generate permits and complete a needs assessment for financial assistance.
- Greater integration with the IGAC direction. Members from the zoning committee are now participants on various working groups which are looking for the best solutions.
- Requests that the federal government step up efforts for needed regulatory changes. Currently, the pilot relies on the Manitoba Animal Diseases Act for regulatory authority. This is an interim measure until federal regulation can support the zoning requirements

- Ensuring that there are sufficient people, resources, equipment & funding to support the efforts. As we gear up to full implementation, manpower & resources must be in place to ensure 24/7 operation. Letters of understanding outlining roles and responsibilities between CFIA, AAFC, and the Manitoba government have been drafted and awaiting signature. These agreements identification of which agencies will be lead of specific activities and what communication channels / networking will be used. A submission has been sent to AAFC for consideration of the federal commitment toward the next five years of the program.

**What's this mean to the Sheep Industry?** In the months to come, the WHL site will be taking a pro-active position in its role to prepare industry for livestock movement monitoring.

- Every shipment crossing the WHL site will receive additional information about the program.
- Senders/receivers will be contacted directly and encouraged producers to provide movement information.
- Assistance will be offered for generating permits and completing application for financial assistance, if interested.

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## West Hawk Lake Zoning continued

Although lambs, sheep and goats are individually identified, the predominant tag type is a metal tag with some plastic dangle tags also in evidence. The metal tags do not lend themselves to ease of capture of individual animal identification. For the purposes of the pilot, one tag number from each lot is read and a permit generated which still provides important information: departure location and contact; the nature of the load, species and number of animals; the destination location and contact; and the license plate of the transporting vehicle.

Permits can be initiated by the producer or shipper who is ready to send a load of livestock. An example of a permit is below:



### Zone Permit - West Hawk Lake - Manitoba to Ontario

General Information	
<b>Permit ID:</b>	PW3333HCCPX
<b>Permit Type:</b>	West Hawk Lake - Manitoba to Ontario
<b>Status:</b>	Not Validated
<b>Created:</b>	06-Aug-2008 13:01 MDT
<b>Generated:</b>	06-Aug-2008 13:01 MDT
<b>Expires:</b>	05-Sep-2008 12:00 MDT
<b>External Reference:</b>	
Movement Information	
<b>Source Premises:</b>	West Hawk Lake Test (A0320872) - Test 2 (MB333DVVWW)
<b>Destination Premises:</b>	West Hawk Lake Test (A0320872) - Test 1 (ON333DVQ7)
<b>Transport Info:</b>	License: T33 VSK (Saskatchewan)
<b>Species:</b>	Sheep
<b>Creator Comments:</b>	Test example permit with one tag read on a shipment of 50 lambs destined for Ontario slaughter.
Animals Shipped/Received (Animals: 1 Total, 0 Additional, 0 Missing)	
	00 0124000299979286
<b>Legend:</b> (+) - Added at Reconciliation, (-) - Not Reconciled	

For more information, please contact:

**Canadian Animal Health Coalition** WHL Zoning Coordinator, Ann Boyda – 780.430.7767 or ann@animalhealth.ca

**Canadian Sheep Federation** Executive Director, Jennifer Fleming-MacTavish - 519.824.6018 or jennifer@cansheep.ca



# BSE, On-Farm Food Safety and Record Keeping

By Lorraine Hall, On-Farm Food Safety Coordinator

Last fall, a series of town hall meetings were held for stakeholders in the CFIA medicated feed regulations. These meetings raised awareness among producer groups about record keeping requirements as they relate to the ruminant feed ban. According to the feed ban, any person who manufactures animal feed must keep records for ten years that include the following information:

- Formula for the animal feed including the name and weight of each ingredient
- A mixing sheet that shows that each lot of the animal feed has been produced in accordance with formula referred to in the above record
- Whether the feed contains any prohibited material
- Date of preparation
- Lot number and identification records of the feed
- Where the feed is distributed and how much

These records only need to be retained if the food contains an animal product (such as milk, meat, or eggs) or by-product (rendered animal proteins and fats). If the feed does not contain any of these ingredients, but is made up of only mixtures of cereal grains, oilseed meals, forages, minerals, vitamins derived from non-animal sources, the records are not required. In addition, every person who owns ruminants must keep copies of all invoices for animal feed that contains prohibited material.

**Why are these records so critical?** Record keeping criteria are a reflection of international standards and market access requirements. Accurate records allow for traceability and proper risk assessment in the event of contamination of feed with prohibited material.

Records are critical in demonstrating the integrity of the system and showing that rules and regulation are being properly implemented.

Before BSE awareness came to the forefront, the onset of most diseases generally occurred soon after exposure to causative agents, easily demonstrating cause and effect. However, BSE poses a different situation, with the average onset of disease six to seven years following exposure. This makes recreation of feeding protocols essential to ensure an accurate investigation and risk assessment. An accurate traceability and record keeping system can help in the development of policies to prevent reoccurrences of disease, as well as provide valuable data to support or refute commonly held ideas. With the discovery of BSE and its slow onset, new guidelines were needed to help control this disease. These new requirements include record keeping as an important approach to recreate what happened several years before an occurrence.

BSE has become the international measuring stick for traceability and record keeping, and plausible explanations of an incident can assist to appease the international marketplace. In the international marketplace, Canada, as an export dependent country, must work hard to retain a share of the global market. For certain countries, the capability to trace inputs to a food product will play a significant role in the exportability of that product.

Record keeping requirements also relate to the potential presence in the feed of other harmful chemical or biological hazards. Feed system controls are important to ensure that safe animal feed is entering the system, because eventually it may end up in the human food chain.

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## On-Farm Food Safety continued

This is where HACCP or HACCP based plans come into the picture, which can help to prevent contaminants from entering the food system via good record keeping and taking appropriate corrective actions.

Contamination events can happen at feed mills, on farms, rendering plants, and processors. To help prevent a contaminant from spreading, records are crucial. The who, what, when, how many, how much and how long all provide critical information in preventing a contaminant from getting further downstream into the food chain.

An example that clearly illustrates this for sheep producers occurred in June 2008. Instead of adding premix of monensin to a complete feed, a feed mill error occurred when the concentrated drug was added. The result was a concentration of monensin that was more than forty times what it should have been. When some of the treated sheep started to die, the red flag was raised, and the remaining market weight sheep were held until the appropriate withdrawal time was met. This example shows the need for good record keeping, at the feed mill and at the farm.

Relevant records would include date and volumes of feed received, feed ingredients received, which animals were exposed for how long, how much was eaten, and the withdrawal period.

It's impossible to know in advance what reason may necessitate the need to reconstruct feeding protocols. The regulatory requirements are for the worst possible case scenario, and reconstruction of an event can only be based on records that have been completed before the incident.

Records must be available for those who must try to evaluate the risk and report to international bodies. Accurate records contain pertinent information to assist in preventing the spread of a contaminant should an incident occur.

In addition, records kept over time can be a very helpful tool in managing different aspects of flock health.

*The information contained in this article is derived from presentations made by Dr. Doug Scott and Sergio Toluoso on June 18th, 2008 at the Feed Ban Record Keeping Working Group meeting.*



# Laboratory Information for Canada's Scrapie Programs

By Courtney Denard, Scrapie Project Coordinator

Submitting samples to laboratories is a major component to both scrapie programs run out of Scrapie Canada. For the National Genotyping Survey, blood samples or DNA samples (from DNA extracting ear tags) are sent off to be tested. For the Voluntary Scrapie Flock Certification Program, it is brain (obex) samples that are tested through the program. Below is information regarding sample submission and laboratories for both scrapie programs.

## Laboratory Information For The Voluntary Scrapie Flock Certification Program

As part of the Voluntary Scrapie Flock Certification Program (SFCP), producers must submit at least one brain (obex) sample per year to be tested for scrapie. Producers can take a sample from any sheep/goat over one year of age that dies naturally on the farm, or if no sheep/goat dies naturally on the farm within the year, a cull must be submitted. In the latter case, the cull must be at least 24 months of age. Also, if any sheep/ goat over one year of age dies on the farm, a sample must be submitted for testing.

The cost of the brain test is about \$55 per sample (depending on the lab). Producers can submit either the entire head to the laboratory, or they can submit just the obex. If a producer chooses to submit the entire head, most labs charge an extra fee to remove the obex- about \$15 per head (depending on the lab). If producers have received a subsidized position on the program, the \$55 testing fee is covered by program. If producers have not received a subsidized position on the program, samples can be tested for free through the Canadian Food Inspection Agency's (CFIA) Scrapie Surveillance Program.

Information on the CFIA's Scrapie Surveillance Program can be found on the CFIA website at [www.inspection.gc.ca/english/anima/heasan/disemala/sctre/surve.shtml](http://www.inspection.gc.ca/english/anima/heasan/disemala/sctre/surve.shtml)

Laboratories completing brain testing for the SFCP include:

### **Prairie Diagnostic Services**

4840 Wascana Parkway  
Regina SK, S4S 7J6  
Phone: 306-787-6435  
[www.usask.ca/pds/index.htm](http://www.usask.ca/pds/index.htm)

### **Alberta Agriculture**

Post Mortem Room  
O.S. Longman Building  
6909-116 Street  
Edmonton AB, T6H 4P2  
Phone: 780-422-1923

### **Animal Health Laboratory**

Laboratory Services - University of Guelph  
Building 49, OVC, Box 3612,  
Guelph ON, N1H 6R8  
Phone: 519-824-4120 X: 54544  
Fax: 519-821-8072  
[www.ahl.uoguelph.ca](http://www.ahl.uoguelph.ca)  
*\*This lab is CFIA accredited*

Under Pathway 2 and Pathway 3 of the SFCP, producers are required to complete genotype testing. Two samples must be sent in for genotyping- one sample must be sent to an accredited laboratory, while the second sample can be sent to a non-accredited lab. To date, the Animal Health Laboratory at the University of Guelph is the only accredited lab in Canada. For a full list of laboratories completing genotype testing under the SFCP, please see: [www.scrapiecanada.ca/VSFCPGeno.html](http://www.scrapiecanada.ca/VSFCPGeno.html)

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## Scrapie Canada continued

### Laboratory Information for the National Genotyping Survey

Blood or DNA samples must be submitted for testing under the National Genotyping Survey. Producers wishing to participate on the program have two routes available to them. If submitting blood samples, producers must schedule a visit with their veterinarian or vet technician to collect the blood. If collecting DNA samples through DNA extracting ear tags, producers are not required to have a vet visit the farm. By tagging the animal with DNA extracting ear tags, DNA is placed in a small vial, which is sent off to the lab for testing. In both cases, producers must fill out the Sample Submission Form and send this paper work into the lab with the samples (along with \$10 (plus tax) per sample). The Sample Submission Form is available online at [www.scrapiecanada.ca/images/English/genotypesubmissionform.pdf](http://www.scrapiecanada.ca/images/English/genotypesubmissionform.pdf) or by contacting Scrapie Canada.

Laboratories completing brain testing for the National Genotyping Survey include:

#### **Animal Health Laboratory**

Laboratory Services - University of Guelph  
Building 49, OVC, Box 3612,  
Guelph, ON, N1H 6R8  
Phone: 519-824-4120 X: 54544  
Fax: 519-821-8072  
[www.ahl.uoguelph.ca](http://www.ahl.uoguelph.ca)  
*\*This lab is CFIA accredited*

#### **TransBIOTech**

201, route Monseigneur-Bourget  
Levis, Quebec, G6V 9V6  
Phone: 418-833-8876 ext.3120  
Fax: 418-833-8867  
[www.tbt.qc.ca](http://www.tbt.qc.ca)

#### **Bova-Can Laboratories**

Saskatchewan Research Council  
125-15 Innovation Blvd.  
Saskatoon, SK, S7N 2X8  
Phone: 306-933-7700  
Fax: 306-933-5505  
[www.src.sk.ca](http://www.src.sk.ca)

#### **Vita-Tech**

1345 Denison Street  
Markham ON, L3R 5V2  
Phone: 416-798-4988; 1-800-667-3411  
Fax: 905-475-7309  
[www.vita-tech.com](http://www.vita-tech.com)

Producers have until December 16, 2008 to complete genotype testing through the National Genotyping Survey.

For more information on programs offered by Scrapie Canada, please call 1-866-534-1302 or e-mail [admin@scrapiecanada.ca](mailto:admin@scrapiecanada.ca).



# COOL vs. Product of Canada Labelling

By Sean McKenzie, National Coordinator – Animal Identification and Traceability

Recently, there have been changes made to the labelling requirements for processors on what they are either required to or have the option to print on their products. With the upcoming requirement for Country of Origin Labelling (COOL) in the USA, and the recent announcement regarding *Product of Canada* (or *Made in Canada*) labelling here, it seems like a good time to have a look at the two and compare.

## Product of Canada & Made in Canada claims:

These guidelines provide two labelling options for the processing industry to follow when wishing to attach a notation on the packaging of their products as to the source or origin of their product. These guidelines, which are set to come into effect December 31st of 2008, will be monitored and enforced by the Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA). While the use of these labels is voluntary if a company chooses to apply them they will be required to adhere to specific rules as to which label can be applied and have the ability to support their claims through proper documentation.

These changes have come out of Canada's Food and Consumer Safety Action Plan, and the *Canadian Food Labelling Initiative* which was announced in May of 2008. This initiative revisited the definition of '*Product of Canada*' and '*Made in Canada*' on food labels and in advertising to ensure that Canadians are aware of the origins of the food products they purchase. After December 31st if a *Product of Canada* label appears on a product it must contain only products which have been grown or are wholly made from Canadian materials.

The *Made in Canada* Label, however refers to products that have undergone their last substantial transformation in Canada and are required be followed by qualifiers to address where the contents originated. For example, it may read "*Made in Canada*, from domestic and imported ingredients".

For either '*Product Of*' or '*Made In*' Canada claims the implementation date is December 31st, 2008. However, products already on store shelves will not be recalled, they will simply make their way through the system as usual and any new products made on or after December 31st will be subject to the new rules for labelling.

These rules also only refer to food products only, so agricultural products such as animal feeds, agricultural seed, and plants are not included under these guidelines. Other suggestions are made within these new recommendations that allow processors to attach such labels as "Distilled in Canada" or "Packaged in Canada" to attribute certain characteristics to a product as they feel might be beneficial to their sales. The main focus is however that these labels should be accurate and not misleading to the public, and will be monitored for truthfulness and accuracy.

## Country of Origin Labelling (United States)

The first and major difference between COOL and the *Product of/Made in Canada* labelling is that COOL will be mandatory for all products being sold in the USA. The implementation date, which is now set for September 30th, 2008, has been delayed, for all products other than fish and shellfish, several times since the original planned implementation on September 30, 2004. This was to allow for legal review and such, but it appears now that it will be the final delay and the legislation will come into force this year. Initially written into the 2002 Farm Security and Rural Investment Act, COOL applied to all beef, lamb, pork, fish, perishable agricultural commodities (ie: fresh or frozen fruit & vegetables) and peanuts but was recently expanded (2008 Farm Bill) to include chicken, goat meat, ginseng, pecans and macadamia nuts.

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## COOL vs. Product of Canada Labelling continued

Similar to the *Product of Canada* any materials currently in stores will not be subject to COOL, only commodities produced or packaged on or after September 30th will require appropriate labelling. Another difference is that where 'Made in Canada' labels are specifically for those products that contain either both imported and domestic or wholly imported components the COOL legislation does not apply to products that may contain ingredients otherwise mentioned in the legislation. Meaning if there has been some form of preparation or otherwise substantive change to the material it does not require a COOL label.

Under these rules, for a covered commodity to be labelled as "United States origin", it must meet specific requirements; for perishable agricultural commodities they must be produced in the USA; beef, lamb, pork, chicken and goat covered commodities must be (1) born, raised and slaughtered in the US, or (2) present in the US on or before July 15th, 2008 and remain there continuously until slaughter. In the case of ground meat products the rule states that the package shall include a list of all the countries of origin contained therein.

Enforcement of the COOL legislation will be managed by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). The USDA has entered into agreements with individual States having existing enforcement infrastructure to assist in compliance reviews of fish and shellfish covered commodities and which will now be expanded to include all covered commodities. Any investigation or other enforcement actions will be the responsibility of the USDA and they will determine the number of reviews to be conducted and has developed comprehensive procedures for compliance reviews.

	COOL	Product of Canada	Made in Canada
<b>Compliance</b>	Mandatory	Voluntary	Voluntary
<b>Applies to</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Muscle cuts of beef, lamb, chicken, goat &amp; pork</li> <li>- Ground beef, lamb, pork, goat and chicken</li> <li>- Wild and farm raised fish</li> <li>- Perishable agricultural commodities, peanuts, ginseng, pecans and macadamia nuts</li> </ul>	Any product wishing to apply label that meets specific criteria – must be wholly produced in Canada with Canadian products	Any product wishing to apply label that meets specific criteria – must be qualified with statements as to origin of components (eg. From domestic and imported or from imported products)
<b>Enforcement</b>	USDA, with assistance from individual states	CFIA	CFIA
<b>Coverage</b>	Only specifically mentioned commodities, does not apply to covered commodities used as ingredients in products	Only wholly Canadian products	Refers to components of a product,
<b>Documentation</b>	Any supplier must maintain records to identify the immediate previous source and immediate subsequent source of a covered commodity for a period of 1 year	No specific documentation required – but as with any other aspects of label information a company should be able to provide evidence that a product meets the criteria set out in the guidelines if such claims are used	No specific documentation required – but as with any other aspects of label information a company should be able to provide evidence that a product meets the criteria set out in the guidelines if such claims are used



## News From Around the World

### USDA Issues New COOL Rule

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) on Tuesday issued an interim final rule for the mandatory country of origin labeling (COOL) program that will become effective Sept. 30th. The rule covers muscle cuts and ground beef (including veal), lamb, chicken, goat and pork; perishable agricultural commodities (fresh and frozen fruits and vegetables); macadamia nuts; pecans; ginseng; and peanuts -- as required by the 2002 and 2008 Farm Bills. USDA implemented the COOL program for fish and shellfish covered commodities in October 2004.

Commodities covered under COOL must be labeled at retail to indicate their country of origin. However, they are excluded from mandatory COOL if they are an ingredient in a processed food item. Food service establishments, such as restaurants, lunchrooms, cafeterias, food stands, bars, lounges and similar enterprises are exempt from the mandatory COOL requirements.

The rule outlines the requirements for labeling covered commodities. It reduces the record keeping retention requirements for suppliers and centrally-located retail records to one year and removes the requirement to maintain records at the retail store. The law provides for penalties for both suppliers and retailers found in violation of the law of up to \$1,000 per violation.

The rule will become effective on Sept. 30, 2008. To allow time for covered commodities that are already in the chain of commerce -- and for which no origin information is known or been provided -- to clear the system, the requirements of this rule will not apply to covered commodities produced or packaged before Sept. 30, 2008.

The rule prescribes specific criteria that must be met for a covered commodity to bear a "United States country of origin" declaration. In addition, the rule also contains provisions for labeling covered commodities of foreign origin, meat products from multiple origins, ground meat products, as well as commingled covered commodities.

The full text of the interim final rule is available at <http://edocket.access.gpo.gov/2008/E8-17562.htm>

### Livestock Producer Compliance With COOL

Country of Origin Labeling (COOL) takes affect in the United States on Sept. 30, 2008. The following guidance for producers has been provided by the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Agricultural Marketing Service.

Livestock producers are not directly regulated by the COOL interim final rule as livestock are not considered covered commodities. Covered commodities in the livestock arena include muscle cuts and ground beef (including veal), lamb, chicken, goat and pork. However, it is only producers who have first-hand knowledge concerning the origin of their animals. Definitive origin information must be provided to slaughter facilities so that meat covered commodities can be accurately labeled at retail. Presumption of origin by packers and other entities in the marketing chain is not permitted. For example, it is not acceptable to assume that if an animal has no ear tag and/or brands identifying that the animal was born and/or raised in Canada or Mexico, the animal is of U.S. origin.

Under the interim final rule, USDA will consider a producer affidavit as acceptable evidence on which a packer may rely upon to initiate an origin claim, as long as the affidavit is made by someone having first-hand knowledge of the origin of the animals and identifies the animals unique to the transaction. Evidence that identifies the animals unique to a transaction can include a tag ID system along with other information such as the type and sex of the animal, number of head involved in the transaction, the date of the transaction and the name of the buyer.

With regard to what is considered first-hand knowledge, a subsequent producer-buyer (e.g., feeder) that commingles animals from several sources is authorized to rely on previous producer affidavits as a basis for formulating their own affidavit for the origin of the new lot. Such affidavits must also identify the animals unique to the transaction.

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## News From Around the World continued

### Compliance With COOL continued

Documents and records that may be useful to verify compliance with COOL include but are not limited to birth records, receiving records, purchase records, animal health papers, sales receipts, animal inventory documents, feeding records and breeding stock information.

According to the rule, producers that participate in the National Animal Identification System (NAIS) can consider this sufficient documentation for an animal's origin. Participation in the NAIS program is voluntary but does provide a livestock producer "safe harbor" for COOL compliance.

"Ultimately, the slaughter companies are responsible for determining the origin of the product being labeled," stated Peter Orwick, executive director of the American Sheep Industry Association. "Because producers are the ones that have first-hand knowledge of the animal's origin, it may be necessary to provide records to processors to verify this."

ASI will be meeting with other livestock and agriculture groups as well as the meat industry this month to develop comments to be submitted in September. The American Meat Institute has launched a COOL website, [www.countryoforiginlabel.org](http://www.countryoforiginlabel.org), to assist in answering labeling questions.

### AMI Unveils COOL Website

The American Meat Institute (AMI) unveiled an updated country-of-origin labeling (COOL) Web site, [www.countryoforiginlabel.org/](http://www.countryoforiginlabel.org/), that reflects changes included in the recently passed 2008 Farm Bill. Mandatory COOL takes effect Sept. 30, 2008.

As part of an effort to provide the most current information about the law's requirements, the Web site contains a "Frequently Asked Questions" section where meat and poultry companies and the public may submit questions about implementing the law.

### Counting Sheep Easier in New Zealand Now

Reproduced from: [afp.google.com](http://afp.google.com)

It used to be a national joke that New Zealand had 20 times more sheep than people. But figures released on Saturday show sheep numbers are dwindling and there are now only eight of the woolly animals per head of the country's population.

In 1982 the ratio of sheep to people was nearly 22, but Meat and Wool New Zealand revealed there are now 34 million sheep to 4.2 million people. The sheep population in the agriculture-based country dropped sharply by 4.3 million or 11 percent in the past year alone due to drought and the expansion of dairying, the organization said.

Sheep farmers were also struggling with low prices for wool and lamb, said spokesman Rob Davison, with the number of lambs due for slaughter in the coming year down six million to 20.3 million. "Lambchops will be harder to find," he said.

## Contact Us ...



130 Malcolm Road  
Guelph, Ontario  
N1K 1B1

**Tel:** (519) 824-6018

**Toll Free:** 1-800-684-7739

**Fax:** 1-866-909-5360

**Email:**  
[jennifer@cansheep.ca](mailto:jennifer@cansheep.ca)

**Website:**  
[www.cansheep.ca](http://www.cansheep.ca)