

# COOL Testimony – Economics and Safety

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I am a cattle rancher from Big Timber, but today I am here as a consumer and as a woman.

Women read labels. Most purchasing is done by women. If it has too much corn syrup in it, I don't buy it. If the lamp says tested by Underwriters Laboratory, I assume the light fixture won't shock me into tomorrow. If the blouse I look at in the store says "Made in China", "Made in Italy" or "Made in North Carolina", I again have a choice. If the grapes come from Mexico, I might want to give them an extra wash. So why when almost everything is labeled in order for consumers to make smart and healthy choices (one of the nifty things about being a citizen of a democracy like the USA), why isn't our beef?

The average consumer if you ask her thinks that the USDA stamp means that it is American. And big food corporations have been using the image of the honest farmer in those nice bib overalls and the rancher on his horse to, shall we say, mislead, the American consumer into thinking she's getting an American product. And why would they do that? It's cheaper? But this scheme is starting to unravel primarily because of the Mad Cow scare. Fear of hormones was not enough to drive the American housewife away, but BSE is. And unless we get straight with the American housewife, she's going to take her business elsewhere. Kids will be eating tofu burgers whether they like it or not because no mother will put her child in harm's way if she can help it.

Trust is the cornerstone of middle class market economy. I grew up in a town of 1500, spent my young adult life in big cities and now live in a town of 1500. In small towns and very large cities you usually know your local butcher and it is in his self interest to keep your business. But most folks live in suburbs and rely on food market chains and the new bully on the food block, Wal-Mart. They have to trust that what's on the shelves and in the meat section is safe and healthy. They have always trusted that image of hard working rancher and farmer. And the rancher and farmer in turn have trusted the packers and retailers to take the food they have labored over and process it, package it, and sell it in a reliable way. That is the circle of

trust. But that trust can also be exploited and can be corrupted and when that happens anywhere, the circle is broken.

We can't wait for a disaster like Britain's mad cow either as producers or consumers. We Americans and Montanans need to take control over our economic and health safety by labeling our food as Produced in Montana and taking responsibility for our future. If the consumer then prefers mystery meat, then so be it. It will be her choice. And as for Montanans, we will have an opportunity to become a prosperous and proud community again and not just a bunch of people living near each other.

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