

LMA Blasts Latest USDA Delay In Calling For Beef Checkoff Vote

KANSAS CITY, Mo. — Following a recent USDA decision that will push a vote on the beef checkoff into at least 2001, Livestock Marketing Association President John Willis said, "It's time to start treating American beef producers like citizens, and not suspects."

Willis commented following notification from USDA's Agricultural Marketing Service, which has had LMA's referendum petitions for 10 months. AMS said the petition validation/verification process will now be turned over to an outside accounting firm.

"Our understanding," Willis said, "is that USDA will take bids from national accounting firms to verify the petition signatures. USDA will require that the process be completed by Dec. 1, with an incentive bonus if it's completed by Nov. 3."

"That means we will have had numerous primary elections, two national political conventions, a Presidential election, and elections in 50 states, in less time than it will take USDA to decide one simple question: do beef producers have the right to decide whether to keep spending their own money on the

checkoff?"

Willis added that the validation procedures USDA is requiring the accounting firm to use "are a recipe for failure." Among other things, these procedures will require producers who signed the petitions to prove, with documents, that they sold cattle during 1998 or 1999.

The contractor's work, USDA says in documents provided to LMA, must have a "maximum error rate" of 0 percent, and must all be done by mail survey. "Mr. Secretary," Willis wrote in a letter to USDA Secretary Dan

Glickman, "to how many of the mail surveys which come into your home do you respond?" especially when they come "from someone not personally known to you?"

And how likely, Willis asked Glickman, are you to mail someone you don't know "personal financial documents" such as a bill of sale?

LMA believes, Willis wrote, "that the error rate inherent in this type of survey is far larger than any error rate in connection with petition signatures," and that the "errors inherent in the survey techniques" will be blamed on those seeking a checkoff, just as they were blamed on producers seeking a pork checkoff referendum.

The failure of this validation process, Willis said, "will be used to justify not calling a referendum. That result will be totally unjust and unacceptable."

LMA, which led the national drive to obtain a referendum vote, delivered 146,000 petitions to USDA in November 1999. Of these, 126,000 were signed within a qualifying period.

In addition to the paper petitions, LMA provided USDA with a CD-ROM disk, into which all of the petitions had been entered in a Microsoft database format, so they could be handled expeditiously by USDA. Instead, the database itself became the subject of a five-month "verification" project, and an additional justification for delay.

"This process has gone on long enough," Willis said. "The hundreds of thousands of producers who signed our petitions are now asking, 'What has

USDA been doing for almost a year? And why do taxpayer dollars continue to be spent on a process USDA is supposed to have been handling for the past ten months?"

"Instead of putting these signatures under a microscope, USDA should be investigating the millions of producer dollars being illegally spent on so-called 'producer communications,' which use checkoff money as campaign funds to tell producers how wonderful the checkoff is."

The petition signers have been under a cloud of suspicion for far too long, he said, while USDA's delays and mishandling of the verification process are the real issues. "At a minimum, we think producers should get the 'benefit of the doubt,'" Willis said. "We're merely asking for USDA to stop considering 'vote' a four-letter word."

He pointed out that in the 10 months USDA has had the LMA petitions, about \$44 million has been collected and spent by the beef promotion and research program. "Until the agency gives producers a vote, sadly, what this industry has is a checkoff program, without checks and balances."

"Finally," Willis said, "producers will be asked for their vote in this fall's national elections. They should ask the candidates — and particularly their current members of Congress — why USDA should be allowed to continue to ignore their statutory responsibility to enforce the Beef Act and Order, and drag out this process. Time has run out on this process, and it's time for those who pay, to have the final say — immediately."

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