

Review of capability of methods for the verification of country of origin for food and feed

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Background

Country of origin is defined as the country where food or feed is entirely grown, produced, or manufactured, or, if produced in more than one country, where it last underwent a substantial change. In the UK, EU-assimilated legislation states that indication of the country of origin is a mandatory labelling requirement for food and feed, including products such as meat, vegetables, eggs, honey and wine.

The country of origin claim plays an important role for consumers who tend to relate certain country of origin labelling to superior quality or brand identity. Patriotism (or ethnocentrism) can also play a role in consumer food choice. In Europe, there are 3500 products with a specific geographical origin and their production methods are officially protected (Protected Designation of Origin = PDO; Protected Geographical Indication = PGI; Geographical Indication (for spirit drinks) = GI). These goods often carry a premium price. In addition to customer preference and sale price, country of origin claims are important to businesses when they seek to (i) monitor food miles (carbon footprint), (ii) ensure sustainable sourcing of, for example soy and palm oil (including new Regulation (EU) 2023/1115 on deforestation-free products), (iii) avoid trading of goods which are subject to sanctions, (iv) reassure consumers over concerns of farming and animal welfare standards, (v) avoid foods which are linked to exploitation of farm workers, enforced, or child labour.

'Verification' of geographical origin involves testing against a database to confirm that the data for a sample are consistent with those for that geographical location as claimed on a product label. Verification therefore does not involve testing a sample from an unknown location to unequivocally identify its provenance, as such methods are not available or are extremely limited in scope.

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