



NEWS RELEASE

Defense Commissary Agency

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Knowing a product's origin is 'COOL'

*By Kevin L. Robinson,
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FORT LEE, Va. – Commissary customers who purchase fruits and vegetables, ginseng root, and nuts such as peanuts, pecans and macadamias can know the country of origin of these products thanks to a new policy implemented by the Defense Commissary Agency.

“At DeCA, we want our customers to know as much as possible about the source of the products they buy,” said Acting DeCA Director and CEO Thomas E. Milks. “And, we want them to rest assured that wherever the products originate, the items will continue to pass through an increasingly stringent food-safety inspection process before they arrive on commissary shelves.”

On March 15, 2009, the U.S. Department of Agriculture placed into effect the final regulation for retailers classified as full-line grocery stores, supermarkets and club warehouse stores to adhere to the country of origin labeling law, also known as the COOL program, said the agency's director of performance and policy, James J. Hudson Jr.

Because DeCA isn't required to be licensed by the USDA, the agency is exempt from the labeling law, Hudson said. However, since May, military commissaries have been displaying country of origin information either on the product packaging or at the point of sale for produce, certain nuts such as peanuts, pecans and macadamias, and ginseng root. “If our industry suppliers haven't already done so, we display this information to the greatest extent possible in our stores as a service to our customers,” he said.

The majority of the country of origin information is placed on the product by the supplier in the form of stickers or package labeling, or it's placed on the item by commissary personnel

who affix COOL labels provided by suppliers. Stores also are displaying signs in areas that allow “customers to clearly read and understand” country of origin information, Hudson added.

The COOL program does not affect processed foods defined by the U.S. Department of Agriculture as retail items that have undergone specific processing resulting in “a change in character,” or have been combined with at least one other covered commodity or food component such as chocolate, breading or tomato sauce.

A change of character means an item has been cooked – such as frying, broiling, grilling, boiling, steaming, baking and roasting – or cured, smoked or restructured. Examples of processed foods are roasted peanuts, fish sticks, canned tuna and flank steak with Portabella stuffing or marinated garlic shrimp.

According to the USDA, food service operations also are exempt from the COOL program. This means restaurants, cafeterias, bars, delicatessens, food stands and any places that offer “ready-to-eat” foods are not required to use the country of origin labeling. Commissary deli-bakery operations are included in this group.

Under the COOL program retailers are bound to tell customers what country their products came from. However, knowing where a product comes from is only part of the equation for military commissaries, said Army Col. David R. Schuckenbrock, director of DeCA’s public health and safety directorate. “We work with the military services to ensure the safety and security of the groceries that are sold in our commissaries.

“Everything sold in military commissaries comes from approved sources that are continually inspected by Army and Air Force food safety specialists to ensure compliance with the highest food safety standards,” Schuckenbrock said. Approving authorities for these sources include the Food and Drug Administration, the USDA and the U.S. Army Veterinary Command.

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About DeCA: *The Defense Commissary Agency operates a worldwide chain of commissaries providing groceries to military personnel, retirees and their families in a safe and secure shopping environment. Authorized patrons purchase items at cost plus a 5-percent surcharge, which covers the costs of building new commissaries and modernizing existing ones. Shoppers save an average of more than 30 percent on their purchases compared to commercial prices – savings worth more than \$4,400 annually for a family of four. A core military family support element, and a valued part of military pay and benefits, commissaries contribute to family readiness, enhance the quality of life for America’s military and their families, and help recruit and retain the best and brightest men and women to serve their country.*