Statement of Joe Maxwell
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Good morning. My name is Joe Maxwell, and I serve as the Co-Founder and Chief Strategy Officer of Farm Action, a national farmer-led organization working to stop corporate monopolies, restore fair competition, and rebuild rural America. I appreciate the opportunity to testify today.

I want to make one point as clearly as possible: Reinstating Mandatory Country of Origin Labeling for beef and pork must be a top U.S. priority in the 2026 USMCA Joint Review.

We provided detailed written comments, but today I want to emphasize why this is urgent—regarding our food security, the survival of independent ranchers, and the long-term stability of the North American beef supply.

The U.S. cattle herd is in crisis
USDA reports that the U.S. beef cow herd has fallen to its smallest level in about 70 years. Ranchers tell us the same thing across the country: they cannot justify rebuilding their herds because the market does not reward U.S. origin. Tyson just closed a plant in Lexington, Nebraska and is scaling back a beef plant in Amarillo, Texas. These moves impact about 4,900 jobs.

At the same time, beef imports are rising to record levels—over four and a half billion pounds last year, much of it from Canada, Mexico, Australia, and Brazil. But at the retail meat case, that imported product is indistinguishable from U.S.-raised beef.

That combination—a shrinking domestic herd and rising imports—is a dangerous trajectory for America's food security and rural economy. The United States should not be increasingly dependent on foreign beef while our own herd declines to historic lows.

MCOOL is essential for rebuilding the U.S. cattle herd
Reinstating MCOOL would give ranchers the most important thing they lack today: a reliable, enforceable market signal that U.S.-raised beef will be recognized and rewarded.

Reinstating MCOOL would:

• Allow consumers to choose U.S.-raised beef and ensure that choice benefits U.S. ranchers;

• Give producers the confidence to reinvest in multi-year herd expansion;

• Strengthen rural economies by keeping food dollars local; and

• Build a more resilient domestic supply capable of withstanding global shocks.

Fairness and the incentives of our trading partners
Canada and Mexico benefit when the U.S. herd stays small. With no MCOOL in place, their livestock and beef enter our market without differentiation. We respect our trading partners, but the U.S. must ensure its producers are not disadvantaged in their own home market.

The USMCA Joint Review is the correct venue to resolve this
Two of the parties at the table, Canada and Mexico, are the two countries that brought the WTO complaint that threatened the U.S., forcing Congress to repeal MCOOL for beef and pork in 2015. The WTO never ruled against the principle of origin labeling—only the U.S. implementation. A negotiated, non-discriminatory MCOOL framework is fully possible. The Joint Review offers the clearest path to finally resolving this issue with Canada and Mexico.

Consumers overwhelmingly support MCOOL
Poll after poll shows that 80–90 percent of Americans want mandatory country-of-origin labeling for meat. USDA's recent voluntary "Product of USA" fix was an important step, but only mandatory labeling guarantees universal transparency.

Let me close with this:

The United States cannot afford a cattle industry at its smallest level in 70 years. We cannot afford a food system where foreign beef fills the gap while American ranchers go out of business. And we cannot afford a trade policy that denies our own producers the ability to stand behind the name "Product of the United States."

MCOOL is not optional — it is essential. It is essential for rebuilding the herd, restoring fairness, and protecting our food security.

The USMCA Joint Review is your moment to fix this. Farmers and consumers are counting on USTR to stand up, lead boldly, and deliver mandatory country-of-origin labeling once and for all.

Thank you.