

Truth in Country of Origin Food Labelling – Concept

Discussion Paper by John Wilson – General Manager, Fruit Growers Victoria Limited

Australian consumers want to know where their food comes from.

However currently Australian food labelling practices are at best misleading or at worst deliberately deceptive. Phrases like “Made from local and imported content” or “Product of Australia” mean little to the average Australian consumer and when the local imported content includes “added water” the deception can be complete.

Multinational food companies will argue that production costs including labour, freight, and packaging etc, are all legitimate inputs in determining Australian content. However that is not what consumers want to know!

Consumers want to know what proportion of total “food” going into their bodies and their children’s bodies comes from Australia.

Currently packaged food is labelled ‘Product of Australia’ or ‘Made in Australia’. ‘Product of Australia’ means that significant ingredients must come from Australia and most of the processing should happen here too. A ‘Made in Australia’ statement may only mean that the food was ‘substantially transformed’ here and that a certain proportion of the production costs were incurred here. These definitions are currently under review.

Even an informed consumer will have difficulty with country of origin details buried in the fine print on the back of containers and packets. The only way to do this is to move to a simple system that eliminates the potential for deception by marketers.

Let us consider water which is not a food! It is essential for life but it has no nutrient value. It is easy to deceive the true proportion of the food in a container by including added water as part of the Australian content.

The following examples calculate the same Australian content for a hypothetical juice in two ways; Example 1 includes “added water” as Australian content, **Example 2** excludes “added water” as Australian content. The outcomes are poles apart because water is not “**grown**” in Australia. Even if added water is removed from the mathematics altogether the result would be only 10% Australian content.

Australian Content by Food Weight with ADDED WATER included			
Ingredient	Source	Q#	Lt or Kg
Concentrate	Brazil	10	litre
Sugar	Australia	1	kilogram
Added Water	Australia	89	litre
Juice Example 1		100 litres	

Australian Content by Food Weight with ADDED WATER EXCLUDED			
Ingredient	Source	Q#	Lt or Kg
Concentrate	Brazil	10	litre
Sugar	Australia	1	kilogram
Added Water	Australia	89	litre
Juice Example 2		100 litres	

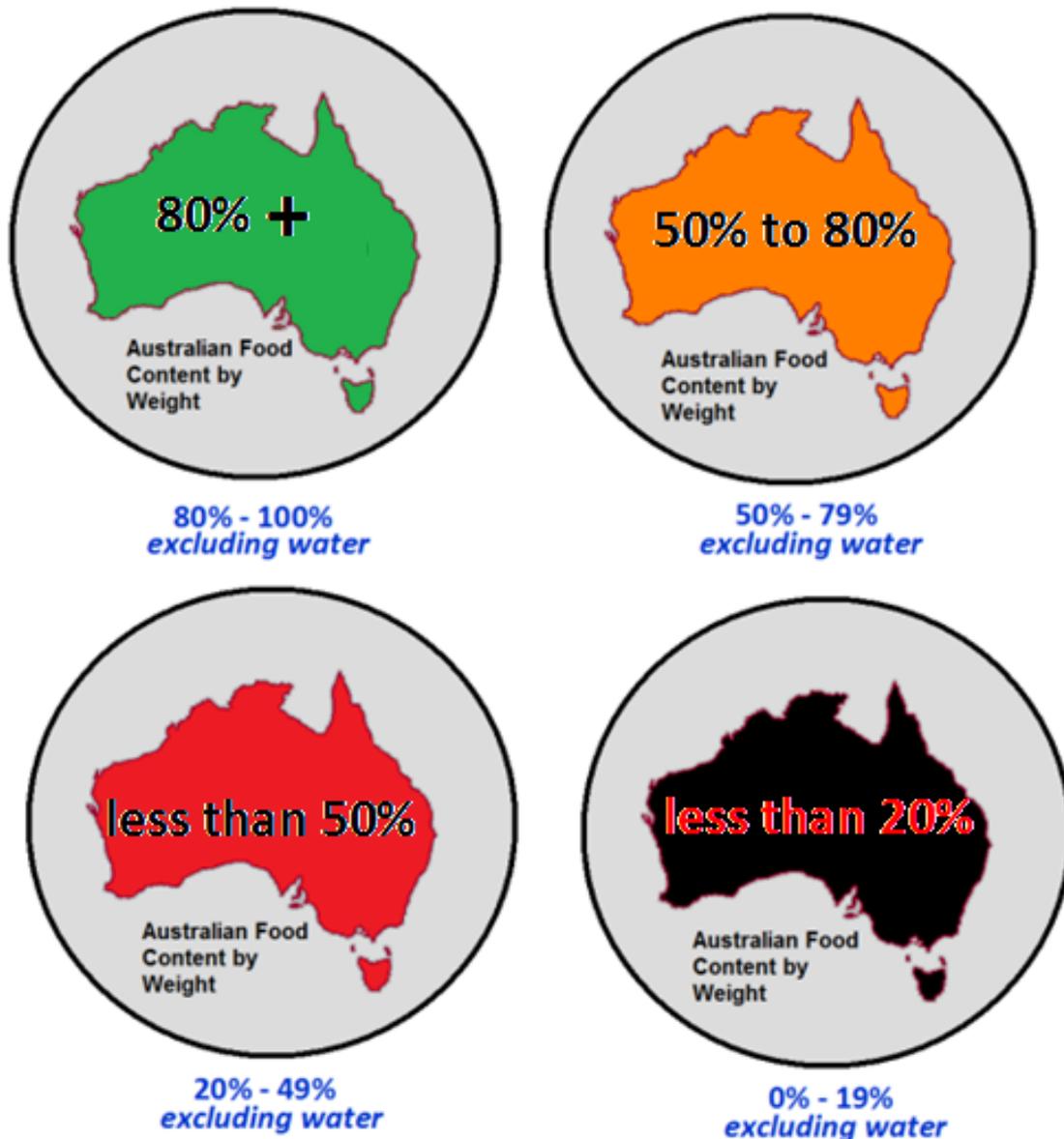
If you want to know if the food that goes into your mouth is grown on Australian farms then clearly the second calculation informs you better.

Country of origin labelling needs to be positioned where consumers can easily see it. It should be on the front of all packaging and located in the same place and of a minimum size.

Recently a talkback caller to ABC radio suggested a traffic light system to identify country of origin with green, amber and red representing high, medium and low Australian content respectively. This concept is not new and had been discussed in many forums for different issues. It is notable that it is in the public consciousness.

It has merit but consumers deserve more information so they can make more objective decisions.

Such a system could be “Australian Food Content by Weight” utilizing the type of calculation in [Example 2](#) which excludes “added water”. The following labels adopt the green, amber and red concept with the addition of black. Green (80% to 100%), amber (50% to 79%) and red (20% to 49%) would represent high, medium and low Australian content respectively and black (0% to 19%) would represent very low Australian or no Australian content by food weight.



The following peach container designs have been adjusted to include “Australian Food Content by Weight” labelling under this system.



The SPC Peaches image was taken from the Woolworths www.homeshop.com.au website and the Woolworths Homebrand container is a scan from the actual product purchased on that website. Neither product had its country of origin identified on the website (see following website extracts) but the Homebrand product is South African.

When the “Australian Food Content by Weight” labels are added the Australian grown product is clearly identifiable and consumers can make an informed choice without difficulty. This is not the case on the Woolworths website.



Critics of such a system might argue that there would be a reduction of reasonable flexibility for manufacturers and increased labelling costs could be passed on to growers. Deeper thought would suggest that a share of the market is better than none!

Vegetable growers who have been disenfranchised by frozen Chinese vegetables masquerading as “Made in NZ from Local and Imported Content” would consider that, if consumers had had a real choice to purchase Australian, cost and flexibility roadblocks could have been overcome.