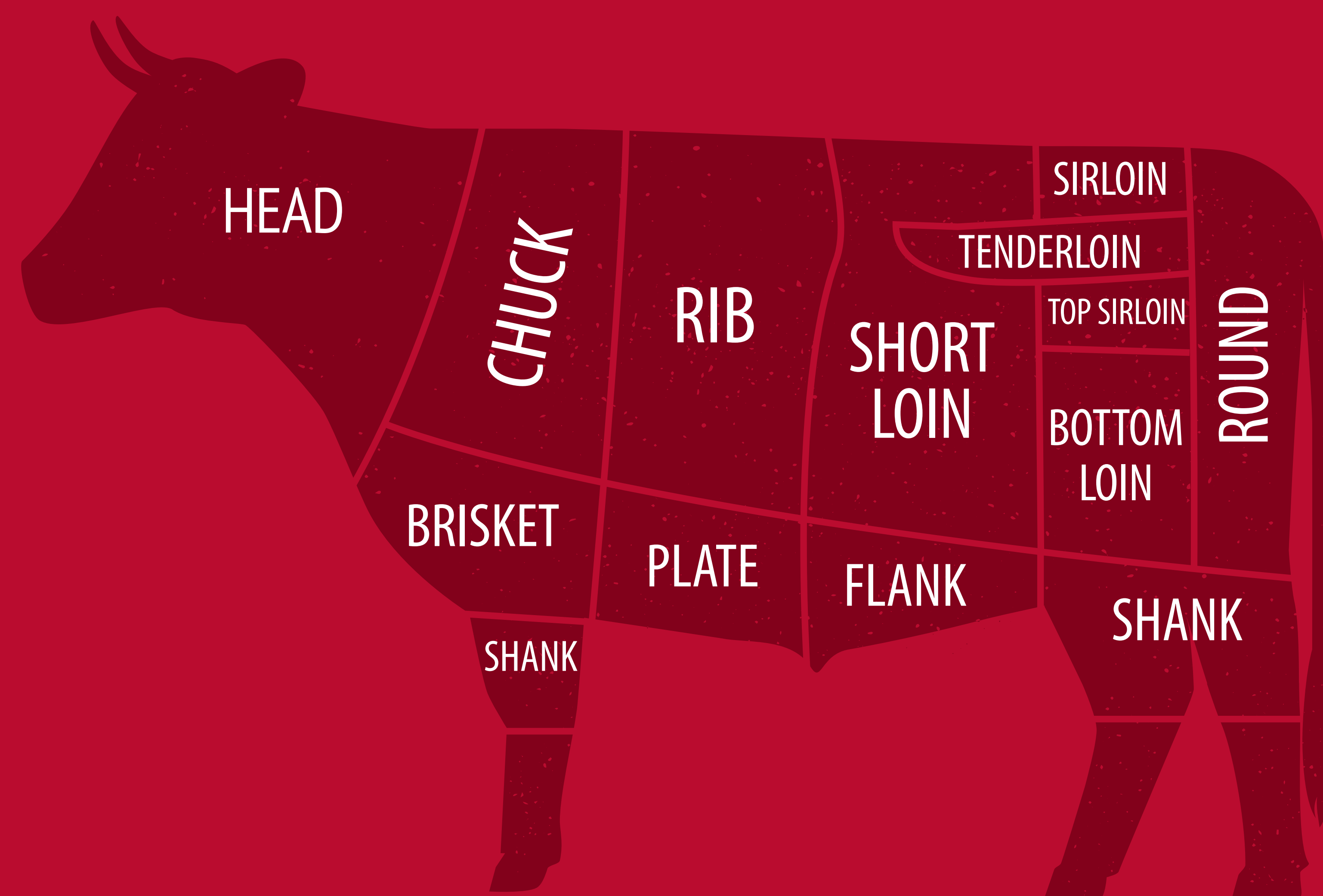


Too C.O.O.L. for Rules: A Pilot Study of Consumer Perceptions about Country of Origin Labeling on Beef



UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA
EXTENSION

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Background

There are many regulations and consumer-driven attributes surrounding the processing and packaging of meat products in the United States, including country of origin labeling (COOL) on beef cuts and ground beef. Under COOL regulations, retailers must display mandatory labels that indicate where certain food products originated. These products are labeled with "Product of the U.S.A.," "Born, Raised, and Slaughtered in the U.S.A.," or one of a few variations on this theme. This is not mandatory for beef. In 2015, COOL requirements were repealed for beef. This was in response to Canada and Mexico threatening to levy billions of dollars in tariffs against the United States if such labeling remained. Presently, labels that indicate country of origin on beef are voluntary.

Without any COOL measures in place, this opens the door for beef to be imported from any country, further cut or processed in the U.S., and subsequently labeled "Product of the U.S.A." This raises concerns amongst American cattle producers and food-conscious consumers. Food labeling requirements may seem like a non-issue to many people, but there are several groups with differing opinions about what the label should include. One side supports a voluntary generic label such as "Processed in the U.S.A." with the argument that mandatory labeling programs add cost for retailers, meat packers, and cattle producers that will ultimately bear this added cost. While the other side supports mandatory COOL and "Product of the U.S.A." with the argument that it will positively impact American cattle producers due to increased transparency and demand for American-grown food.

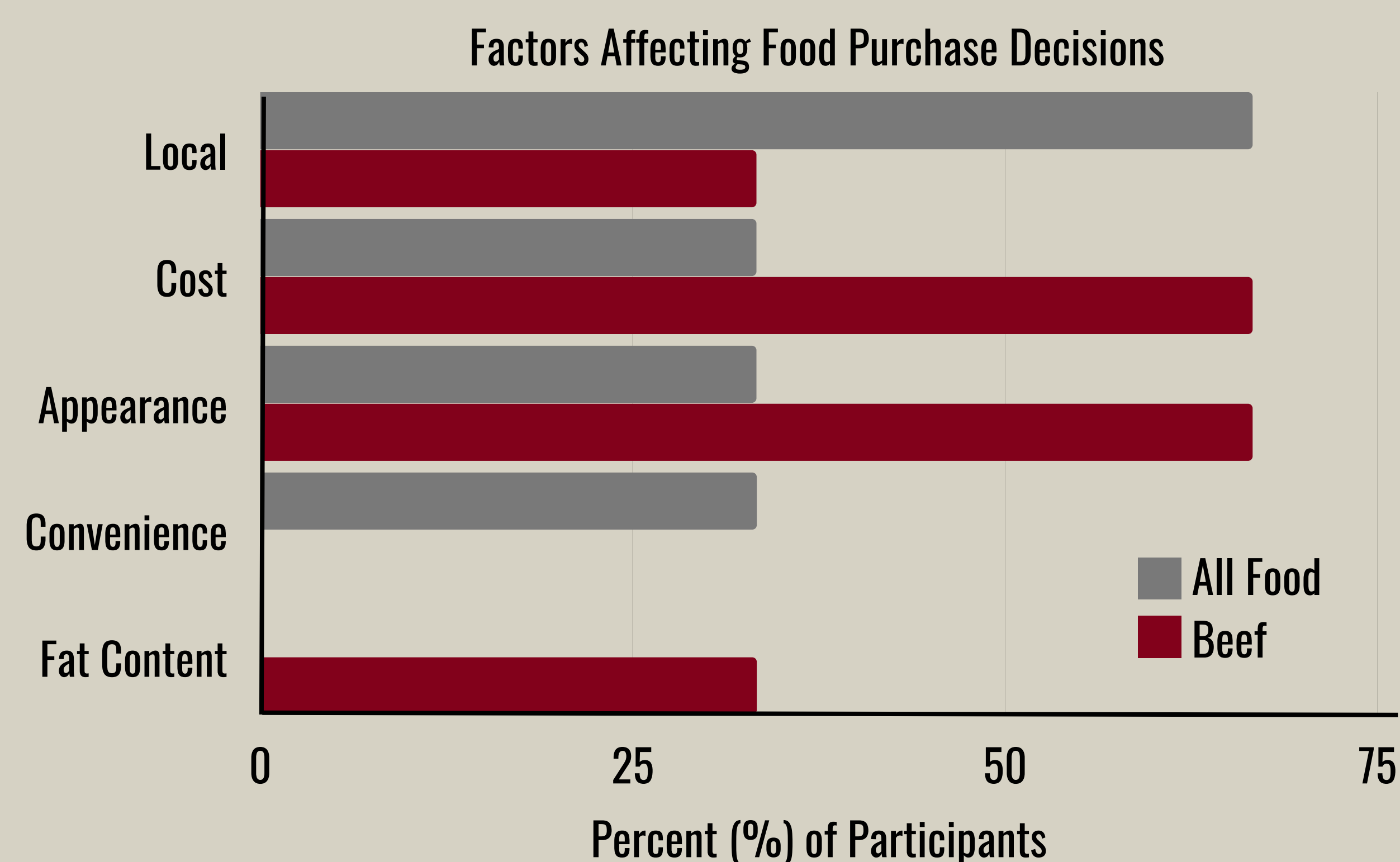
The real question is how much do consumers care about what country their beef comes from? The primary objective for this pilot study was to determine whether consumers are familiar with country of origin labeling and what it represents on beef. A secondary objective was to describe what value or importance country of origin labeling holds personally for consumers.

Methods

- Face-to-face interviews were conducted with South Georgia residents who were not involved in raising cattle (to represent an average consumer)
- Interviews were audio recorded, transcribed using Otter.ai, and manually coded for key themes
- Results were reported as percentages of all participants

Key Findings

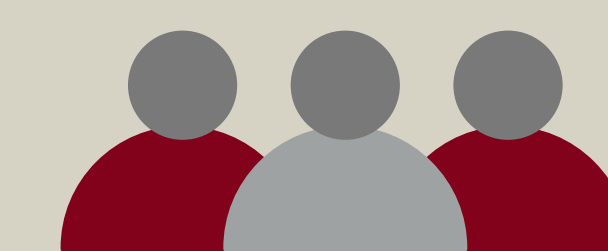
When asked what they look for while purchasing food in general and beef specifically, participants most commonly reported "local" for all food and "cost" or "appearance" for beef. Origin of beef was not a top response, indicating that COOL was not a priority for these consumers. Throughout the interviews, it was clear that participants were unfamiliar with country of origin labeling criteria in general.



100% stated "Country of Origin" should mean where cattle lived, **66%** clarified should also mean where cattle were slaughtered



100% said "Product of the USA" should mean where cattle were born, raised, and slaughtered



100% had **NEGATIVE** reactions to COOL criteria that allow foreign beef to be labeled as a "Product of the USA"

Next Steps

In March 2023, after the completion of this pilot study, the USDA proposed a rule that would allow "Product of the USA" labeling to be voluntary, but could only be used when the animal was born, raised, slaughtered, and processed in the United States. The rule would prevent foreign beef from being labeled as an American product. Based on this new development, next steps include:

- Conduct interviews with a broader participant base in South Georgia (goal is 50+ participants)
- Continue to assess consumer knowledge and value of country of origin labeling on beef
- Incorporate COOL information into local livestock educational programs for youth and adults