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Dear Mr Wilson,

I am gravely disappointed to have to write to you so soon following our communication on 1st September this year. You will remember that following a visit to some of your stores earlier that week, we wrote to you questioning your procedures in regard to labelling and over-labelling beef in your stores. These procedures appeared to be in breach of Trading Standards and Food Safety laws.

Further to our letter to you, you carried out an internal investigation, and wrote to us with your findings. Your subsequent assurances that the findings were due to isolated 'human error', and that procedures would be put in place to ensure this practice did not occur again were reassuring, and in light of this, we decided not to notify Trading Standards and the Food Standards Authority on this occasion.

In a follow-up visit to your Warwickshire store today, we once again found labelling issues - it appears that, in spite of your assurances, the same humans are still making the same errors. The attached pictures once again demonstrate a Booker label applied on top of the original label, obliterating most of the original information. Only the best before date can be seen – both the freezing and slaughter date have been covered, which is contrary to FSA Regulations. The second picture is even more concerning. Although the original and the subsequently applied Booker labels are distinctly separate, the shelf life is influenced. The original foreign language Uruguayan label shows a best before date of March 2021, the new Booker label extends this date to July 2021.

It appears that the fail-safes and new procedures that you promised in your response were nothing more than lip service. We are seriously concerned about these practices. Much of this beef will end up in the service sector – pubs, restaurants, hospitals, schools - and will be fed to unsuspecting consumers with no idea where the beef has come from, when it was slaughtered or that it has been sat in a freezer for 23 months. It is well documented that a shorter freezer life points to a better quality product - longer best before dates therefore have the potential for a bad taste experience, which may turn consumers away from a valuable source of protein. We are not scared of imported beef, or of Uruguayan beef; as we said in our last letter, we understand that currently we do not produce enough beef to feed our country. Some imports are necessary. However, we will not accept, however unintentional this may be, misdirection in labelling. Transparency, accuracy and honesty in labelling is imperative; it is the responsibility of all retailers to ensure that the consumer is allowed an informed choice, it perpetuates brand trust, and it is the law.

The Agriculture Bill continues its game of ping pong between the Commons and the Lords next week, as the beef industry strives to protect the quality standards it currently has. It would appear to be a pointless exercise if we cannot rely on our retailers not to manipulate the information supplied at the time of import. We will be informing the FSA and Trading Standards of our findings, and submitting our evidence along with our previous correspondence with you.

I look forward to your response.

Yours sincerely,

Neil Shand
CEO, National Beef Association.