

Matthew Weeman DVM, MS, PAS-nutrition
Position: Support SB 188

I am writing in support of SB 188 which would make it illegal to misbrand a food product as meat when it is created from a synthetic culture line or other substrates not typically associated with or defined by USDA FSIS.

This bill is consistent with other labeling directives defined by the USDA and serves as a proactive response to a growing, future food product market. It is refreshing to see legislation that attempts to construct a regulatory fabric before consumer issues arise. This bill is important to help protect the public health by ensuring consumers understand what the product they are purchasing is simply by reading the label.

This legislation aligns well with prior requests from the public regarding food clarity. Consumers wish to be informed of food origin, food nutrient information and content. Additionally, consumers have become increasingly more concerned about product labeling to indicate how certain products are differentiated. Consumers who wish to consume meat alternative products should be able to take confidence that the product they are consuming is plant-based or lab cultured by simply looking at the label. The majority of consumers are dis-jointed from the food production setting. It is critical that our regulatory system ensure clarity. Legal labeling definitions are important in creating the clarity consumers desire. Consumers have requested that milk be labeled as rBST free. There is no scientific difference between milk from cows treated with rBST and those that are not. Regardless, consumers requested the label distinction, the USDA created the regulatory framework to provide it and the standard was set; therefore, even if there is no scientifically discernable difference between cultured meat products and those of animal origin it would be contrary to current labeling regulations to make the products indistinguishable through deceptive labeling practices. Consumers who wish to purchase lab cultured meats are likely doing so with purpose and therefore it should be easy for them to identify which products they prefer. For the same reasons, consumers who wish to purchase meat from animal origins should be able to take confidence in knowing they are receiving the product from a natural origin. This law will not limit the consumer choice in the marketplace and actually provides clarity which therefore empowers them to make the choices that most reflect their purchasing desire. Additionally, while it will be possible to culture cells of natural origin, genetic modification is also a tool that could be used to facilitate, amplify or otherwise create efficiency in the lab culturing technique. Consumers have already demonstrated a concern regarding genetic modification, I personally believe this concern is unwarranted yet-it exists. Consumers who are worried about genetic modification of food are going to want to know if the "meat" they are consuming was cultured in a lab-the label should readily inform them.

Furthermore, protein of animal and lab origin alike each require specific food safety regulations as they inevitably present different food safety risks to the consumer. It is important that products, which look identical in the marketplace are accurately labeled to ensure consumers understand how to safely prepare and consume the product, or at least can refer to the appropriate agencies who will provide important safety information on appropriate product handling. The public health risks to consumers who eat animal protein will differ from those choosing lab or plant based proteins. Additionally, from an epidemiological perspective, consumers need to be able to purchase product with informed consent. There is a certain degree of risk that meat from a cow is more likely to contain *E. coli* or *Salmonella* than

meat grown in a lab. However, it is inconceivable that meat grown from a cow could be altered genetically to harm a human who consumes it or to be adulterated during a culturing process by a perpetrator of bioterrorism. The latter will be a future risk for lab produced meat products. The federal government needs to protect citizens from such risks, unfortunately federal oversight often lags need. The state of Maryland has demonstrated a desire to preemptively strengthen or clarify other federal statutes and this should be no exception. The Maryland state legislature has a responsibility to protect consumers from these risks. It is conceivable that consumers who are already confused about where their food comes from will be even more confused when there are seemingly identical products coming from various different production mechanisms. To provide clarity, labels need to be accurate- SB 188 puts accuracy of food labels at the forefront. When food safety issues do arise, it is important that regulatory agencies can accurately identify and traceback the origin of the product. It is important that a state legislature work proactively to protect the health of the public and therefore, I recommend a vote of approval on SB 188.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Matthew Weeman". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Dr. Matthew Weeman