



Food Labels for Consumers

From fair trade to free range, learn what the labels mean and how certifying your farm's products can help you set yourself apart from the crowd.

By Carol Ekarius

Think of walking down a market aisle. There are labels on almost every product there.

From fair trade to free range, those labels help you, the consumer, decipher a wealth of information about the items you're looking at--what's in them, how they were made, where they came from--and that information helps you make educated buying decisions.

As a producer, you'll want to learn what they mean and which one(s) to choose and how certifying your farm's products can help you set yourself apart from the crowd.

Food Labels "Claims" Roundup
All Natural: USDA recognized claim for products that are minimally processed and contain no artificial ingredients, including but not limited to artificial colors or flavors. The label must explain the use of the term "natural" (such as, "No added colorings or artificial ingredients"). No third-party certifier exists, but producers must be able to show evidence that their product meets the claim.

Biodynamic: Products are certified by third party as grown using biodynamic principals. www.demeter-usa.org

Cage Free: Generally applied to egg cartons; chickens are not kept in a cage, but they don't necessarily have access to the outdoors. No third-party certifier exists, but producers must be able to show evidence that their birds are not caged.

Certified Humane: Animals must be treated in a humane manner. Under the program, growth hormones are prohibited and animals are raised on a diet without antibiotics, but antibiotics can be used in the treatment of sick animals. www.certifiedhumane.org

Fair Trade: Primarily applied to imported agricultural products that meet strict labor and sustainability standards. www.transfairusa.org

Forest Stewardship Council: Third-party certified sustainable forestry program. www.fscus.org

Free Range: Generally applied to egg cartons and chicken products; indicates that birds have some access to the outdoors but it doesn't necessarily mean that they have access to pasture. No third-party certifier exists, but producers must be able to show evidence that their birds are allowed access to the outdoors.

Fresh Poultry: The term "fresh" on the labeling of raw poultry products means that the carcass has never been frozen or reduced to an internal temperature below 26 degrees F. No third-party certifier exists, but producers must be able to show evidence that their birds are sold fresh.

Grass-fed: A new USDA designation is just going into effect, so producers using the grass-fed label will need to meet third-party certification standards. However, the American Grassfed Association (www.americangrassfed.org) and consumer groups are working with the sustainable-practices certifier, the Food Alliance (www.foodalliance.org), to apply even stricter requirements, including that animals must have regular access to pasture. The USDA-approved claim does not require access to pasture, and animals can be fed silage.

Heart Check Symbol: A designation made and certified by the American Heart Association; producers who meet AHA guidelines and participate in their certification program may use the heart-check symbol on their labels.

Kosher: May be used only on the labels of products prepared under Rabbinical supervision. No third-party certifier exists, but producers must be able to show evidence that their products meet the Kosher rule.

Leaping Bunny: Used on cosmetics to indicate that products were not tested on animals. This label is granted by The Coalition for Consumer Information on Cosmetics. www.leapingbunny.org



Local or State Identifiers: Many states allow producers to apply for the right to label their products with a local or state-grown label. Contact your state department of agriculture to learn about such programs in your area.

Predator Friendly: Producers who are certified as Predator Friendly have made a commitment not to allow any lethal control (shooting, trapping, poisoning) to protect their sheep and cattle from native predators. www.predatorfriendly.com

Salmon Safe: Certified products from Salmon-Safe, a nonprofit in the Pacific Northwest recognizing fish-friendly farms and products that keep salmon running the rivers. www.salmonsafe.org

USDA Organic: All products now labeled as organic must meet USDA requirements and be certified by one of the third-party certifying organizations around the country. www.ams.usda.gov/nop

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