
Identifying sustainable food: an introduction to marketing terms

Food products and packages are peppered with marketing claims and terms espousing qualities that are designed to steer the consumer toward buying foods that are sustainable and healthy for people and the environment. But with so many terms to keep straight, how does one decide whether to buy the certified organic, vegetarian fed chicken or the free range certified humane chicken?

The first step is learning **what makes a good eco-label**. According to the Consumers Union Guide to Environmental Claims, “the best eco-labels are seals or logos indicating that an independent organization has verified that a product meets a set of meaningful and consistent standards for environmental protection and/or social justice.”¹ This would be considered a third party label or claim because it is made by an entity other than the seller (first party) or the buyer (second party).

Because it is important to **be familiar with the more common food related claims and certifications**, below is a list of common marketing terms.² This list has been developed with the aid of the Sustainable Food Policy Project which was a collaboration of the following organizations: Food Alliance, Health Care Without Harm, Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education, Oregon Center for Environmental Health, and the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy.

There are many more claims and certifications beyond this list, so it is important to **know where to go to find more information about specific eco-labels**. The Consumers Union Guide to Environmental Claims (<http://www.greenerchoices.org/eco-labels/>) as well as (<http://ecolabelling.org>) are helpful resources for learning more about these terms.

Labels Certified by an Independent Organization



Certified Humane Raised & Handled

This label is designed to certify that animals raised for dairy, lamb, poultry and beef products are treated in a humane manner. Under the program, growth hormones are prohibited and animals are raised on a diet without antibiotics, though antibiotics can be used in the treatment of sick animals. Access to clean and sufficient food and water and a safe and healthful living environment are also required from birth through slaughter. Producers also must comply with environmental standards. Processors must comply with the American Meat Institute Standards, a higher standard for slaughtering farm animals than required by the Federal Humane Slaughter Act. www.certifiedhumane.com



Fair Trade Certified

Fair Trade standards aim to ensure that farmers in developing nations receive a fair price for their product and have direct trade relations with buyers and access to credit. They encourage sustainable farming practices and discourage the use of child labor and certain pesticides. To bear the label, products must be grown by small-scale, democratically organized producers. Fair Trade Certified products include coffee, tea, chocolate, sugar, bananas and other tropical fruit, rice and grains. TransFair USA is the third-party certifier of Fair Trade goods in the US. It is one of twenty members of Fairtrade Labeling Organizations International, the umbrella organization that sets certification standards. www.transfairusa.org



Food Alliance Certified

To earn FA certification, farms and ranches must meet standards that provide safe and fair working conditions; ensure healthy and humane care for livestock without adding hormones or non-therapeutic antibiotics; use no genetically modified crops or livestock; reduce pesticide uses; conserve soil and water resources; and protect wildlife habitat. Farmers are required to set goals for continual improvement and sign an affidavit that genetically engineered crops are not used. www.foodalliance.org



Marine Stewardship Council

The Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) is a non-profit organization that promotes responsible fishing practices. The MSC label assures buyers that products come from a well-managed fishery and have not contributed to overfishing. MSC certification standard includes these principles:

- 1) *The condition of the fish stocks* (examines if there are enough fish to ensure that the fishery is sustainable).
- 2) *The impact of the fishery on the marine environment* (examines the effect that fishing has on the immediate marine environment including other non-target fish species, marine mammals and seabirds).
- 3) *The fishery management systems* (evaluates the rules and procedures that are in place, as well as how they are implemented, to maintain a sustainable fishery and to ensure that the impact on the marine environment is minimized).

www.msc.org



Organic

In order to be labeled “organic,” products must meet the federal organic standards as determined by a USDA-approved certifying agency. Organic foods cannot be grown using synthetic fertilizers, chemicals, or sewage sludge; cannot be genetically modified; and cannot be irradiated. Organic meat and poultry must be fed only organically-grown feed (without any animal byproducts) and cannot be treated with hormones or antibiotics. In order to bear the USDA “Certified Organic” seal, a product must contain 95 to 100% organic ingredients. Products that contain 70% to 94% organic ingredients can be labeled “Made with Organic Ingredients,” but cannot use the USDA “Certified Organic” seal. Organic ingredients can be listed on the packaging of products that are not entirely organic.

www.ams.usda.gov/NOP/indexNet.htm



Rainforest Alliance Certified

The Rainforest Alliance works to conserve biodiversity and ensure sustainable livelihoods by transforming land-use practices, business practices, and consumer behavior. The Rainforest Alliance Certified seal is found on coffee, cocoa, chocolate, bananas, orange juice, guava, pineapple, passion fruit, plantains, macadamia nuts, and other tropical products. On certified farms, rainforest is conserved, workers are treated fairly, soil and water quality are not compromised, waste is managed efficiently, chemical use is dramatically reduced, and relations with surrounding communities are strong. www.rainforest-alliance.org/index.cfm



Smithsonian Bird Friendly

The goal of the third party Bird Friendly certification program is to foster conditions on coffee plantations that provide good bird habitats. Maintenance of the tree canopy, diversity in tree and plant species, shade at specific times of the day, and establishment of plant borders around streams or rivers are all included into the Bird Friendly label criteria. The Smithsonian Migratory Bird Center (SMBC) only allows organic certifiers to issue the Bird Friendly label on organically certified products. Organic inspectors must complete a “Shade Certification Check List” and sign a certificate before the SMBC will allow the use of the Bird Friendly seal of approval.

<http://nationalzoo.si.edu/ConservationAndScience/MigratoryBirds/Coffee/>

Labels Not Certified by an Independent Organization**Antibiotic Claims**

The USDA has prohibited use of the term “Antibiotic Free” as a label claim for meats and poultry, but allows “Raised Without Antibiotics” or “No Antibiotics Administered.” These claims imply that no antibiotics were administered to the animal at any point during its life. If an animal becomes sick and requires treatment, it should be segregated from other animals and sold as a conventional meat product. There is often no independent verification of these antibiotic claims.

Cage Free

This is a first party claim that poultry were raised without cages. This does not guarantee that birds were raised with access to the outdoors or on pasture. Birds may have been raised in large flocks in commercial confinement facilities with open floor plans. There is often no independent verification of “Cage Free” claims.

Free Range

Free range and related terms are popular label claims for poultry and eggs and are sometimes seen on other meats. Free range is regulated by the USDA for use on poultry only (not eggs), which requires that birds be given access to the outdoors for an undetermined period each day. In practice, the “Free Range” claim does not guarantee that the animal actually spent any period of time outdoors, only that access was available. Birds may have been raised in large flocks in commercial confinement facilities with open floor plans. There is often no independent verification of “Free Range” claims.

Genetically Modified Organism (GMO) Claims

With growing consumer concern for genetically modified crops and livestock entering the food supply chain, a number of companies have begun to assert their food products are “GMO-Free.” The US organic standards offer independent verification of the process of food production, but there is no guarantee that the product is uncontaminated by GMOs. Some certification programs, such as Organic and Food Alliance, prohibit genetically modified ingredients in certified foods and have corresponding inspection protocols. However, laboratory tests may be necessary to provide maximum surety there has been no cross-contamination of products.

Grassfed

As defined by the American Grassfed Association, this claim means that animals live on pasture, consume a natural forage diet, and do not receive hormone or antibiotic treatments. However, the USDA, in a standard published for comment in 2006, has defined “grassfed” to only mean animals that consume a diet of grasses and silage. The USDA standard does not prohibit confinement or hormone and antibiotic treatments. Suppliers should be clear which standard they claim to meet. There is currently no independent verification of this claim under either standard. Note that “Grassfed” claims are sometimes qualified with supplemental “Grain Finished” claims. This combination describes the conventional industrial livestock feeding model, and invalidates the “Grassfed” claim.

Hormone Claims

The USDA has prohibited use of the terms “Hormone Free,” but meats can be labeled “No Hormones Administered,” meaning that the animals in question did not receive hormone injections or feed supplements. Claims are also frequently asserted that milk products are “rBGH-Free” and/or “rBST-Free.” (rBGH and rBST are hormone supplements given to dairy cows to increase milk production.) Federal law prohibits the use of hormones in hogs and poultry, so hormone claims for chicken or pork should be considered misleading. There is often no independent verification of hormone claims.

Natural

USDA guidelines state that “Natural” meat and poultry products can only undergo minimal processing and cannot contain artificial colors, artificial flavors, preservatives, or other artificial ingredients. “Natural” is used with similar meaning with other food products as well. Beyond this limited definition, “natural” should be considered a meaningless claim. The term does not offer any information about the social or environmental impact of the product. It does not guarantee that livestock were humanely raised or provide information about use of hormones or antibiotics. It does not guarantee that crops were raised according to any standard. There is typically no independent verification of “natural” claims.

Omega-3

This label is a first-party claim seen on a wide variety of foods from mayonnaise to margarine, eggs, cereal, milk, yogurt, cookies, frozen pizza, and canned fish. There are three main omega fatty acids in food: DHA (docosahexaenoic acid), EPA (eicosapentaenoic acid) and ALA (alpha-linolenic acid). Evidence for DHA and EPA and disease prevention is somewhat stronger than the evidence for ALA.³ Food companies are not required by the FDA to indicate the source of omega-3s. Additionally, foods labeled as containing omega-3s vary widely in amount per serving, so it is important to read the fine print on the package.⁴

Vegetarian Diet

This is a first-party claim that livestock were not fed any animal by-products. With the appearance of “mad cow disease,” which is transmitted through animal by-products added to cattle feed, vegetarian diets are increasing. The claim does not indicate that animals were fed a natural forage diet. Animals may have been fed corn or other grains, agricultural by-products or food processing wastes (such as potato peels). Animals may have received antibiotics or other feed supplements. There is often no independent verification of this claim.

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¹ Consumers Union Guide to Environmental Claims. Available at: <http://www.greenerchoices.org/eco-labels/>

² A Guide to Developing a Sustainable Food Purchasing Policy. Available at: <http://www.sustainablefoodpolicy.org>

³ Essential Fatty Acids. Linus Pauling Institute. Available at:

<http://lpi.oregonstate.edu/infocenter/othernuts/omega3fa/>

⁴ Center for Science in the Public Interest. <http://www.cspinet.org/new/pdf/omegas.pdf>