



ANIMAL WELFARE INSTITUTE

A CONSUMER'S GUIDE TO FOOD LABELS AND ANIMAL WELFARE



Many food labels that address the raising of farmed animals are confusing, if not downright misleading. While some animal-raising claims have standards established by law or government policy, most are undefined. In addition, most label claims are “self-made” by the company merely for marketing purposes, and in these cases, the accuracy of the claim is not verified.

The exceptions are “certified” food products, where compliance with a formal set of standards has been verified by an independent third-party audit. Of course, the best way to avoid label confusion and help animals is to choose plant-sourced foods.



This guide includes definitions, and the animal welfare implications, of some of the most common labels applied to dairy, egg, meat, and poultry products. The labels are organized into five categories: “Best Choices,” “Next Best Choices,” “Fair Choices,” “Slight Improvement,” and “Beware of These Labels.”

To use AWI's interactive consumer guide, click either the categories below to view an expanded list of claims, labels, and/or certifications within that category, or refer to the table of common labels, claims, and certifications for a full clickable list of all those we rate.



● BEST CHOICES

These labels feature the highest comprehensive animal care standards, and compliance is verified by a third-party auditing program. This category also contains certified vegan products.

● NEXT BEST CHOICES

These labels typically feature lower comprehensive animal care standards, but compliance is verified by a third-party certification program. Labels in this category have standards that require animals to have outdoor access. This category also includes uncertified products labeled as “plant based.”

● FAIR CHOICES

This category includes labels with weaker comprehensive animal welfare standards that are verified by a third-party audit, as well as labels with standards AWI might consider higher welfare, but which are not verified by a third-party audit or accompanied by a certification. Without verification, the level of animal welfare can range from very low to very high for different products under the same label.

● SLIGHT IMPROVEMENT

This category represents two types of labels: (1) those with comprehensive animal welfare standards that represent just a slight improvement from conventional industry production and are verified on the farm by a third-party audit, and (2) labels that are relevant to a single practice or aspect of production. Products with these labels are preferred over conventionally produced products that often come from factory farms. This category also includes foods labeled “vegetarian.”

● BEWARE OF THESE LABELS

These labels are meaningless or misleading with regard to animal welfare. They may not be meaningless or misleading for other purposes.

● TIPS FOR MAKING BETTER
FOOD CHOICES

● PURCHASING HIGHER
WELFARE PET FOOD

COMMON LABELS, CLAIMS, AND CERTIFICATIONS



AGA Certified Grassfed



American Humane Certified (pasture-raised and free-range eggs)



American Humane Certified
(products other than pasture-raised
or free-range eggs)



Aquaculture Stewardship Council (ASC)



Best Aquaculture Practices (BAP)



Cage Free (eggs)



Cage Free (poultry)



CARE Certified



Certified Animal Welfare Approved by
AGW



Certified Grassfed by AGW



Certified Humane (free-range eggs,
chicken, and turkey)



Certified Humane (pasture-raised
eggs and chicken)



Certified Humane (products without a
pasture-raised or free-range designation)



Certified Vegan/Certified Plant Based



Crate Free (pork)



Crate Free (veal)



Ethically/Responsibly/Thoughtfully
Raised



FACTA Animal Welfare Humane
Certified



Food Alliance Certified



Free Range (uncertified)



GLOBALG.A.P. (GGN Certified)



Global Animal Partnership (Steps 4,
5, 5+)



Global Animal Partnership (Step 3)



Global Animal Partnership (Step 2)



Global Animal Partnership (Step 1)



Grass Fed (dairy, meat)



Halal



Humanely Raised/Humanely Handled



Kosher



Marine Stewardship Council (MSC)



Natural



Naturally Raised



No Added Hormones (dairy, beef,
lamb, pork)



No Added Hormones (eggs, poultry,
bison, veal)



No Antibiotics Administered



One Health Certified



OPT Certified Grass-Fed Organic
(dairy)



Pasture Raised (uncertified)
(products other than eggs)



Plant Based (uncertified)



Real Organic Project



Regenerative Organic Certified
(products other than dairy)



Regenerative Organic Certified (dairy)



Regeneratively Raised/Sustainably
Raised



Slow Growth



UEP Certified (non-cage-free eggs)



USDA Certified Organic



USDA Process Verified



Vegetarian



Vegetarian Fed



Whole Foods Market "Responsibly
Farmed"



Certified Animal Welfare Approved by AGW

The only USDA-approved third-party animal welfare food label that supports and promotes family farmers who raise their animals according to the highest welfare standards, outdoors, on pasture or range. Standards cover the treatment of breeding animals, as well as animals during transport and at slaughter. All farm locations (rather than merely a representative sample) are routinely audited, and compliance with all standards is required. The program, which was created by the Animal Welfare Institute, is administered by the nonprofit A Greener World (AGW).



Certified Grassfed by AGW

An optional add-on to the Certified Animal Welfare Approved (AWA) by AGW program. In addition to complying with all AWA requirements, the animals' entire diet must be grass and forage.



Certified Humane

PASTURE-RAISED EGGS AND CHICKEN

Most Certified Humane standards, including those for egg-laying hens and chickens raised for meat, do not require access to the outdoors and are rated “Fair Choices.” However, Certified Humane offers an additional designation for pasture-raised chickens that is included here under “Best Choices.” For the “pasture raised” designation, 2.5 acres must be provided per 1,000 birds.

This program offers both a year-round pasture option and a seasonal pasture option in which the birds must be on pasture only during months when outdoor temperatures are appropriate and pasture is exposed and available. Compliance with all other Certified Humane standards for the applicable species is also required.



Certified Vegan/ Certified Plant Based

Vegan foods contain no products derived from animals. Several certifications, such as Certified Vegan and Certified Plant Based, have been created to help consumers easily identify packaged vegan products, but many foods without such certifications are also vegan. Always check the ingredients. For uncertified products, even if the label says “plant based,” make sure there are no ingredients derived from animals, such as casein, honey, gelatin, lard, tallow, and whey, among others.



Global Animal Partnership

STEPS 4, 5, 5+

This is a rating program, not a certification program with a single set of standards.

Producers are rated on a six-tier scale, with the lowest standards being Step 1 and the highest being Step 5+. At Step 4 and higher, feedlots are prohibited and all animals must have access to pasture. (At Steps 5 and 5+, they must live continuously outdoors on pasture.) All physical alterations are prohibited at either Step 4 or 5, depending on the species. Standards include the treatment of animals during transport and at slaughter. All of a producer/processor's farm locations (rather than merely a representative sample) are routinely audited, and compliance with all standards is required.



Regenerative Organic Certified

PRODUCTS OTHER THAN DAIRY

This certification builds on the USDA Certified Organic label by requiring an additional certification from either Certified Humane, Global Animal Partnership (at Step 4 or higher), or Certified Animal Welfare Approved by AGW. Animals must be raised on pasture, and concentrated animal feeding operations (CAFOs) and nearly all physical alterations are prohibited. Standards also include the treatment of animals during transport and at slaughter.



AGA Certified Grassfed

American Grassfed Association's Certified Grassfed standards require continuous access to pasture and a diet that is entirely forage. Confinement to feedlots and the use of hormones and antibiotics are prohibited. However, pain relief is not required for physical alterations such as tail docking and horn removal. Also, no standards exist for the treatment of animals during transport or at slaughter.



American Humane Certified

PASTURE-RAISED EGGS • FREE-RANGE EGGS

Most American Humane Certified standards are lower than the other animal welfare certification programs and are rated "Slight Improvements." American Humane's certification of pasture-raised eggs and free-range eggs are notable exceptions. For pasture-raised eggs, 2.5 acres per 1,000 birds is required. For free-range eggs, 1 acre per 2,000 birds is required. Unfortunately, American Humane does not require compliance with all of its standards to be certified, and only a sample of producer/processor farm locations are audited.



Aquaculture Stewardship Council (ASC)

The Aquaculture Stewardship Council is a third-party certification program that includes standards covering fish welfare, the environment, and social responsibility. The welfare standards meaningfully address water quality, stocking density, and slaughter, with species-specific parameters. However, while the standards mention environmental enrichment as a factor in improving health and welfare for farmed fish and crustacean species, it is not required. For some producers with multiple sites, an audit is not required at every location.



Certified Humane

FREE-RANGE EGGS, CHICKEN, AND TURKEY

Most Certified Humane standards, including those for egg-laying hens and for chickens and turkeys raised for meat, do not require access to the outdoors and are rated “Fair Choices.” However, in addition to the pasture-raised designation for chickens (under “Best Choices” above), Certified Humane has a “free range” designation for chickens and turkeys rated here as “Next Best Choices.” Standards under the “free range” designation vary by species, but in general, they require the producer to provide birds with daily access to an outdoor area and to comply with all other Certified Humane standards for the applicable species.



Global Animal Partnership

STEP 3

This is a rating program, not a certification program with a single set of standards.

Producers are rated on a six-tier scale, with the lowest being Step 1 and the highest being Step 5+. Access to the outdoors is required at Step 3; however, the quality of outdoor areas can vary, and even dry lots or concrete pads are allowed. For poultry, outdoor access may be seasonal; for dairy cattle and pigs, access must be continuous. Both indoor and outdoor enrichments are required for poultry and pigs. Standards include the treatment of animals during transport and at slaughter. (Step 3 certification is not available for beef cattle, sheep, or goats.)



Organic Plus Trust (OPT) Certified Grass-Fed Organic

DAIRY

Under this certification, producers must be USDA Certified Organic and meet all applicable standards for livestock health and living conditions, such as providing access to fresh air, sunlight, and exercise. In addition, producers must provide a longer grazing period and a diet that is entirely forage, with no grains, grain-derived feeds, or growth hormones allowed. Producers are also required to have an approved animal care protocol or participate in an additional animal care program, which can be a higher welfare certification program or one created by and for the dairy industry.

Plant Based

This uncertified claim may indicate that a product is entirely plant based, but be careful: Some clever advertisers are known for using this claim on products that contain small amounts of animal products such as dairy, eggs, or even meat. Always check ingredient lists for animal products or look for products that are certified vegan or plant based.



Real Organic Project

This certification serves as an “add-on” to the USDA Certified Organic label (listed below). While its standards largely mirror those of USDA Certified Organic, there are a few improvements, including around stocking densities/space allowances and outdoor access for birds. However, the standards fall short of a top-tier recommendation because they allow (1) calves to be individually housed until weaned (i.e., around 8 weeks), (2) the use of tie stalls and stanchions during milking, (3) dehorning of cattle, and (4) castration of pigs up to 14 days of age. They also do not require pain relief for physical alterations, establish a minimum weaning age for pigs, or place restrictions on the length of transport.



Regenerative Organic Certified (ROC)

DAIRY

This certification builds on the USDA Certified Organic label. The ROC program for dairy differs from that for other animal products (which are rated “Best Choices”) in that dairy producers are not required to obtain an additional animal welfare certification to enter the program (though one is required to move up to “silver” or “gold” ROC levels). Tie-stall barns and individual calf hutches are allowed during a two-year transitional period. Dehorning and disbudding are allowed under specified circumstances, but use of hornless breeds is recommended as an alternative.



USDA Certified Organic

Standards are defined by National Organic Program regulations, which were strengthened in October 2023 to improve the welfare of animals raised organically. Animals are required to have access to the outdoors and environmental enrichment—including bedding, perches for egg-laying hens, and rooting materials for pigs. Certain painful physical mutilations, including the debeaking of birds, routine tail docking of pigs, and tail docking of cattle are prohibited, and the confinement of sows to gestation and farrowing crates is prohibited. The regulations also establish outdoor access requirements, and indoor and outdoor space allowances for egg-laying hens and chickens raised for meat. However, certain poultry operations are not subject to such requirements until 2030, per a phase-in period established by the USDA. The Cornucopia Institute offers scorecards that rate and provide additional information on organic beef, dairy, egg, and poultry companies and brands.



Best Aquaculture Practices (BAP)

BAP is a third-party certification program focused primarily on sustainability and social responsibility, but which also has criteria related to fish welfare. Products are certified with one to four stars, in which each star represents a different phase of production: processor, farm, hatchery, and feed. A product with all four stars means all aspects of the production chain are audited. Even a single star, however, allows products to carry a basic “BAP Certified” logo. The standards for fish welfare do not require environmental enrichment or have species-specific water quality or stocking density standards. BAP requires the use of “humane” stunning methods prior to slaughter, but it allows producers to self-audit to slaughter standards in some cases.



Certified Humane

PRODUCTS WITHOUT A FREE-RANGE OR
PASTURE-RAISED DESIGNATION

Outdoor access is not required for meat birds, egg-laying hens, and pigs; however, minimum space allowances and environmental enrichment must be provided, representing an improvement over minimum conventional industry standards. Beak trimming of hens and turkeys and tail docking of pigs are allowed under certain circumstances. Standards include the treatment of certain species of breeding animals, animals during transport, and animals at slaughter. Compliance with all of the standards is required; however, only a representative sample of the producer's farm locations is audited.



Food Alliance Certified

A nonprofit sustainable agriculture certification program that supports “safe and fair working conditions, humane treatment of animals, and careful stewardship of ecosystems.” Standards provide for access to natural light, fresh air, and adequate space, but access to the outdoors is not required for all animals. Pain relief is not required for most physical alterations, including castration, dehorning, and beak trimming. The program’s audit criteria allow a farm to become approved based on an average score for some areas instead of requiring that every standard be met. Standards do not include the treatment of animals at slaughter.

Free Range (Uncertified)

EGGS

Generally, the “free range” claim indicates that hens were allowed continuous, free access to the outside throughout their laying cycle. Apart from this requirement, additional standards, such as minimum space allowances or quality of outdoor areas (e.g., percentage of vegetative cover), have not been established beyond what is required for “cage free” eggs (a designation rated merely as “Slight Improvement” below) unless the producer participates in a third-party program that certifies “free range” claims pertaining to eggs.

Free Range/Free Roaming/ Not Confined (Uncertified)

PRODUCTS OTHER THAN EGGS

The USDA allows the use of these claims on poultry products if the producer submits animal care protocols and/or affidavits describing the conditions under which the animals were raised and that demonstrate continuous, free access to the outside throughout their normal growing cycle. For ruminants, this means the entire grazing season for the geographical area; producers must also define the claim on the package and include language to convey that the animals were never confined to a feedlot. Minimum space allowances and quality of outdoor areas are not addressed.



Global Animal Partnership

STEP 2

This is a rating program, not a certification program with a single set of standards. Producers are rated on a six-tier scale, with the lowest being Step 1 and the highest being Step 5+. For poultry and pigs, continuous indoor confinement is allowed at Step 2, but enrichment is required. Beef cattle may be removed from pasture for feeding in a lot or yard. For dairy farms, tie-stalls are prohibited, and calves must be pair or group housed. Meat chickens must have natural light and turkeys must be provided additional space. Standards include the treatment of animals during transport and at slaughter. (Step 2 certification is not available for sheep or goats.)



GLOBALG.A.P. (GGN Certified)

The GLOBALG.A.P. program certifies a wide range of agricultural products and focuses primarily on sustainability and environmental protection. Products bearing the GGN Certified label carry a number, which allows the purchaser to look up a profile for that producer. The program has requirements for employee training, and allowable stocking density is determined by health and welfare of the fish rather than productivity. However, the standards covering slaughter are vague and do not specifically prohibit any method. Also, the standards lack any requirement for species-specific environmental enrichment and fail to specify optimal water quality parameters for any species.

Pasture Raised/Pasture Fed/ Pasture Grown/Meadow Raised (Uncertified)

PRODUCTS OTHER THAN EGGS

As with eggs, the USDA allows the use of these claims if the producer submits animal care protocols and/or affidavits describing the conditions under which the animals were raised. Producers are required to provide the same documentation required for “free range” and similar claims (see entry above), and are strongly encouraged to provide additional written documentation demonstrating that a majority of the animals’ lives were spent on pasture and that the term “pasture” or “meadow” on the label describes land where the majority is rooted in vegetative cover with grass or other plants.



American Humane Certified

PRODUCTS OTHER THAN PASTURE-RAISED EGGS
OR FREE-RANGE EGGS

American Humane Certified covers the largest number of farmed animals of any third-party animal welfare certification program in the United States. However, the animal welfare standards are weaker than those of other programs, just slightly above conventional industry animal care standards. Moreover, American Humane does not require compliance with all of its standards to be certified, and it only audits a sample of a producer's farm locations.

Cage Free

EGGS

According to the USDA, this claim indicates the eggs came from hens who were “never confined to a cage and have had unlimited access to food, water, and the freedom to roam”—but in practice, this usually occurs within the confines of a barn. In fact, some cage-free hens may not have much more living space than caged birds, and the term is typically not used on eggs from hens who have access to range or pasture. In theory, use of the term “cage free” on the label requires that the hens are (1) able to exhibit natural behaviors and move around within a barn, (2) provided litter and enrichments such as scratch areas, perches, and nests, and (3) protected from predators. For shell eggs not graded by the USDA, this claim is not verified unless the producer participates in a third-party program that certifies “cage free” claims pertaining to eggs. (In fiscal year 2024, about 52% of shell eggs sold in the United States were graded by the USDA.)

Crate Free

PORK

The USDA does not define this claim; instead, it allows producers to define it and requires that the definition be provided on the label, either next to the claim or connected to the claim by a symbol on the label panel where the claim is first made. Typically, the claim is used to indicate that at no time was the animal or its mother housed in a gestation crate (used to confine sows during pregnancy) or a farrowing crate (used to confine sows from just before birth until the piglets are weaned). However, it is possible that some producers are using the claim to signify avoidance of gestation crates only, while still using farrowing crates.

Crate Free

VEAL

As with crate-free pork, the USDA does not define this claim, but rather requires that the producer include its own definition of the term on the label, either next to the claim or connected to the claim by a symbol on the label panel where the claim is first made. Typically, the claim is used to indicate that calves were not housed at any time in a crate or any other enclosure small enough to prevent the animal from freely turning around or lying down.

However, “crate free” does not guarantee that the calves were housed in social units, which is known to be important to their welfare.



Global Animal Partnership

STEP 1

This is a rating program in which producers are rated on a six-tier scale, from low (Step 1) to high (Step 5+). Standards for Step 1 are only marginally better than conventional industry standards. Not all GAP Animal Welfare Certified labels indicate the Step level of the product. If a Step level is not shown on the label (see image above), consumers should assume the product is rated Step 1. For poultry and pigs, continuous indoor confinement is allowed. Minimal environmental enrichment is required for indoor-housed birds but not pigs. Beef cattle may be removed from pasture for feeding in a lot or yard, and pain relief is not required for castration. Tail docking of pigs is prohibited. Standards include the treatment of animals during transport and at slaughter.

Grass Fed

DAIRY • BEEF • BISON • LAMB • GOAT

The USDA administers a “Certified Grass Fed” program for small producers that annually market (1) fewer than 50 cattle or (2) lambs produced from fewer than 100 ewes. Animals certified under this program must be fed only grass and forage (no grain or grain by-products) and must have continuous access to pasture during the growing season. For meat products, producers must also submit additional documentation showing that animals were fed entirely on grass after being weaned from their mother’s milk. Producers may also participate in the USDA Process Verified Program (PVP) to verify that their product meets their own grass-fed standard without needing to provide the additional documentation. Finally, a producer may use this claim without participating in the USDA Certified Grass Fed program or PVP if it submits animal care protocols and/or affidavits explaining the controls for ensuring that the claim is valid from birth to harvest or the period of raising being referenced by the claim. “Grass fed” is considered a diet claim, and does not address other aspects of animal raising, such as confinement or the use of antibiotics and hormones.

No Antibiotics Administered/ Raised Without Antibiotics

These claims are permitted if producers can show documentation that the animals have not received antibiotics at any point in their lives for any purpose, including treatment of illness. Since nontherapeutic antibiotic use can be one indicator of intensive confinement, this claim has some relevance to animal welfare. On the negative side, however, some producers may choose to allow a sick animal to suffer instead of treating the animal, for fear of losing the opportunity to use the “raised without antibiotics” claim. In addition, recent research suggests that animals not administered antibiotics for any purpose may be more prone to developing disease conditions that cause pain and suffering. Therefore, AWI recommends against choosing products with a “no antibiotics” claim unless the product also contains a higher-welfare claim.

No Added Hormones/ No Hormones Administered

DAIRY • BEEF • LAMB • PORK

The USDA does not approve “hormone free” claims, as all animals produce hormones naturally. “No added hormones” or “no hormones administered” claims can be used if documentation is provided showing no hormones were administered during the course of the animal’s lifetime. The USDA does not routinely test for the presence of hormones, so no verification system exists.

Slow Growth/Slow Grown

Claims related to animal growth rates are now appearing on packages of poultry, in particular chicken meat. Research has demonstrated the animal welfare benefits of using poultry breeds that grow at a slower rate than conventional breeds. According to the USDA, documentation required for claims such as “slow growth” or “heirloom” includes “signed and dated information concerning the specific breed and/or data concerning grow out time from birth to harvest in comparison to regular growth of the specific animal.” However, AWI has concerns regarding how the claim is approved, and only endorses the claim when it is verified by a third-party certification program rated “Best Choice” or “Next Best Choice” in this guide.



Vegetarian

Vegetarian foods do not contain meat, poultry, or fish but may contain egg, dairy, or bee products. While a vegetarian diet generally involves eating fewer animal products overall—which is far better for animal welfare—consumers should be aware that a “vegetarian” label on a food item offers no assurances regarding the origins of its animal-derived ingredients. If the product contains egg or dairy but lacks one of the credible higher-welfare certifications or label claims discussed above, it is highly likely that those ingredients came from hens or dairy cows raised on factory farms under conventional industry standards. The American Vegetarian Association has a certification program to help consumers easily identify vegetarian products. Many uncertified foods will also be vegetarian, but check the label: A product is not truly vegetarian if it contains lard, tallow, or gelatin, all of which come from slaughtered animals.

Cage Free

CHICKEN • TURKEY

The label is meaningless when used on chicken or turkey products since, in the United States, birds raised for meat are not typically caged prior to transport to slaughter.



CARE Certified

CARE Certified is a program developed by Where Food Comes From, Inc. that focuses on three core areas: animal husbandry, environmental stewardship, and people and community. Currently, only standards for cattle and pigs are publicly available. The standards used by CARE Certified are based on industry guidelines and do not demonstrate a meaningful improvement in animal care. Notably, the cattle standards do not apply to feedlot confinement, which can constitute a large percentage of the animal's life, and the pig standards permit the use of gestation crates.

Ethically Raised/ Responsibly Raised/ Thoughtfully Raised

These claims are subjective and misleading. In addition, no third-party certification programs exist for these claims. Since these claims are not defined by the USDA, the producer is required to include on the label an explanation of what is meant by the claim. These claims should be considered a marketing tactic with little or no relevance to animal welfare.



FACTA Animal Welfare Humane Certified

Farm Animal Care Training & Auditing (FACTA) offers two categories of audits for producers: (1) auditing to any standard a producer wishes to comply with, including industry-based guidelines, or (2) auditing to a standard developed by FACTA itself that is based on minimum industry animal care standards. Because both options are designed for companies that wish to follow minimum industry standards, extreme confinement and lack of outdoor access is allowed.

Halal

“Halal” may be used on the labels of meat and poultry products prepared according to Islamic law and under Islamic authority. The Humane Methods of Slaughter Act exempts animals killed for religious purposes from the requirement that they be rendered insensible to pain (“stunned”) before shackling, hoisting, and cutting. Consequently, Halal products may come from animals who have been slaughtered without being pre-stunned. Most animal welfare advocates consider slaughter without prior stunning to be inhumane.

Humanely Raised/ Humanely Handled (Uncertified)

The federal government does not have a definition or set of independent standards for certifying products as “humanely raised.” “Humane” and similar claims are approved if a statement is provided on the label showing the name of the entity that established the standard and includes additional terminology explaining the meaning of the claim for consumers. The USDA merely verifies that the producer has met its own standards based on its own definition of the term; as such, the claims may simply represent a marketing tactic with little relevance to animal welfare. They should be considered meaningless and/or misleading, unless verified by a third-party certification.

Kosher

“Kosher” may be used on the labels of meat and poultry products prepared under rabbinical supervision. Kosher products are typically produced from animals who have been killed without being rendered insensible to pain (“stunned”) before shackling, hoisting, and cutting, which is allowed under an exception to the Humane Methods of Slaughter Act for ritual or religious slaughter. Most animal welfare advocates consider slaughter without prior stunning to be inhumane.



Marine Stewardship Council (MSC)

The Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) program certifies wild-caught fish and seafood as sustainably sourced. Its certification standards do not address animal welfare. Its Fisheries Standard focuses exclusively on three areas—sustainable fish stocks, minimal environmental impact (including ecosystems and bycatch), and effective fishery management—but does not include considerations such as humane treatment of fish or welfare concerns of bycaught species.

Natural

Although a “natural” claim may be used on eggs and dairy, the USDA definition for the term only applies to meat and poultry. According to USDA policy, “natural” can be used on a product that contains no artificial ingredients or added color and is only minimally processed. The label must explain the use of the term. Unless so noted, the term is not an indication that no hormones or antibiotics were administered. The claim has no relevance whatsoever to how the animals were raised.

Naturally Raised

A voluntary standard was established for producers wishing to have this claim verified by the USDA. The claim indicated that the meat came from animals who did not receive antibiotics and hormones and were fed only a vegetarian diet. The definition did not require the improved living conditions for animals that most consumers would expect of the claim, such as access to pasture or range. According to the USDA, it is no longer verifying this claim due to confusion with the “natural” claim, and therefore the claim should not be found on any food products from animals.

No Added Hormones/ No Hormones Administered

EGGS • CHICKEN • TURKEY • GOOSE • DUCK
BISON • VEAL

The USDA prohibits the use of hormones in the production of poultry, eggs, bison, and veal, and any “no added hormones” claims on these products must be accompanied by a statement to the effect that the administration of hormones is prohibited by federal regulation. Such a claim on poultry, eggs, bison, or veal should be considered a marketing ploy with the sole intent to mislead consumers.



One Health Certified

The One Health Certified (OHC) program focuses on five areas: disease prevention, veterinary care, responsible antibiotic use, animal welfare, and environmental impact. Currently, standards are only available for chickens and turkeys. This program requires adherence to outside animal welfare programs, including those developed by the National Chicken Council or the National Turkey Federation, which allow for extreme confinement and do not require access to the outdoors or environmental enrichments. In 2023, the National Advertising Division (NAD) of the Better Business Bureau National Programs found that OHC's general animal welfare claims convey a misleading message that products it certifies have met higher animal welfare standards compared to the rest of the industry and recommended the claims be discontinued. OHC appealed the decision, but the National Advertising Review Board agreed that the claims should be discontinued.

Regeneratively Raised/ Sustainably Raised

These are considered environmental stewardship claims. They will be approved if a statement is provided on the label showing the name of the entity that established the standard and includes additional terminology explaining the meaning of the claim for consumers. The USDA merely verifies that the producer has met its own standards based on its own definition of the term; as such, the claims may simply represent a marketing tactic with little relevance to environmental stewardship (or, by extension, animal welfare). They should be considered meaningless and/or misleading, unless verified by a third-party certification.



United Egg Producers (UEP) Certified

CONVENTIONALLY PRODUCED EGGS
(I.E., NOT CAGE FREE)

A certification program developed by and for the egg industry. The program's standards allow hens to be crowded into small cages for their entire lives without any access to pasture, fresh air, or sunlight. The birds are also denied litter for dust bathing and boxes for nesting. Beak cutting without pain relief is allowed. UEP renamed the seal after federal regulators and the Better Business Bureau found the previous "Animal Care Certified" label to be misleading.



USDA Process Verified

The USDA offers the Process Verified Program (PVP) seal to producers as a marketing tool. Participating producers submit their standards for consideration. Once approval is granted, the USDA conducts audits to verify that the company is following its own standards in raising animals. Hence, the meaning of terms such as “animal care” and “humanely handled” can vary widely among producers, yet all are eligible to receive USDA Process Verified approval for the claim. In fact, products from factory-farmed animals can and do carry the PVP seal.

Vegetarian Fed

This claim, indicating the animal's diet did not contain animal byproducts, has no relevance to the welfare conditions under which the animal was raised.



Whole Foods Market “Responsibly Farmed” Label

Whole Foods Market, Inc. sets standards for farmed aquatic species sold in Whole Foods Markets, which are audited by a third party. These standards deal primarily with food safety, environmental contamination, and the use of certain ingredients in feed. These standards contain no welfare-related provisions and do not cover either the transport or slaughter of the farmed species.

TIPS FOR MAKING BETTER FOOD CHOICES

- Consider a plant-based or vegan diet; keeping animal products off your plate is the only way to ensure that your food choices do not contribute to animal suffering. To give all farmed animals a life worth living, Americans need to eat fewer animal products—that means less meat, dairy, and eggs.
- Avoid intensively farmed meat, dairy, and eggs by looking for foods that have been certified for animal welfare, such as Certified Animal Welfare Approved by AGW.
- Ask your local supermarket to stock more products that are animal welfare certified. Use customer comment cards and helplines to tell food retailers you care about farmed animal welfare.
- While unverified claims aren't as reliable, choose these products over products without any welfare claims. Provided the claim itself has actual animal welfare significance, there is a greater likelihood that these animals were raised under conditions that are in some measure above typical cruel factory-farm conditions.
- Shop at farmers markets and ask farmers how their animals are raised. Visit farms when possible.

PURCHASING HIGHER WELFARE PET FOOD

Several pet food companies now offer food and treats for dogs and cats that are made with certified ingredients. Pet food products bearing Certified Humane and GAP Steps 2, 3, and 4 certifications are available (see certification descriptions for a discussion of their animal welfare standards). Plant-based pet foods might also be an option, with proper supplements to ensure your pet's species-specific nutritional needs are met.

ABOUT THE ANIMAL WELFARE INSTITUTE

Since its founding in 1951, the Animal Welfare Institute has been alleviating suffering inflicted on animals by people. AWI works to improve conditions for the billions of animals raised and slaughtered each year for food in the United States. Major goals of the organization include eliminating factory farms, supporting higher-welfare family farms, and achieving humane transport and slaughter conditions for all farmed animals.



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