

Marketing Claims Q & A

There are many marketing claims which beef producers may be interested in using to market their products to consumers. These claims are designed to provide consumers with more information about products to assist them in making informed purchasing decisions. Some marketing claims are suitable for any producer to use, while others are regulated by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) and require approval for use. If such claims are not properly used in accordance with USDA regulations, legal consequences may occur.

1. Can I add my own label to the packages of meat when I get them back from the locker plant?

No. The USDA Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) regulates label requirements for meat packages. All labels are required to be placed on meat packages at the inspected processing facility. Labels on meat packages must include the following information: 1) product name; 2) special handling statement; 3) inspection legend; 4) net weight statement; 5) ingredients statement; 6) signature line; 7) safe handling instructions.

2. Can I include my operation or business name on the product?

Yes! There is no approval required to do this, and it is encouraged to include your business' name.

3. Can I label my meat as "Natural" or "Naturally Raised"?

Yes, depending on the intended meaning. The terms "natural" and "naturally raised" have different definitions. The "natural" claim describes how a meat product was processed, while "naturally raised" describes how the animal was raised. Almost all fresh meat sold can be labeled as "natural" due to the requirements only stating that products must be minimally processed, and cannot contain any artificial ingredients or preservatives. If the "natural" term is used, then the label must also include a statement clarifying the intended meaning, such as: "no artificial ingredients" or "minimally processed." Products that are sliced, ground, frozen, or cooked can still meet the requirements for the "natural" claim.

The term "naturally raised" refers only to how the animal was produced. In order for this claim to be listed on a label, animal raising information must be submitted to the USDA with the label application for approval.

4. Can I label my meat as "Organic"?

Yes, if the producer has undergone USDA Organic Certification process. The National Organic Program (NOP) is overseen by the USDA, and is responsible for governing all standards for organic products. All meat products containing the labels "Certified Organic" or "USDA Organic" must have been certified by the NOP to have met all requirements of organic production. The term "Organic" may not be used to label any meat which is not certified by the USDA

NOP. Legal consequences may occur if the term “Organic” is utilized without certification from the USDA NOP.

5. Can I label my meat as “Antibiotic Free”?

No, the claim “antibiotic free” is not approved for use in meat products. All meat products are tested for antibiotic residues by the USDA, and the sale of any meat containing such residues is prevented. Therefore, all meat sold in the United States is “Antibiotic Free.” However, the terms “Raised without antibiotics” or “No antibiotics administered” may be used when the meat is from animals that never received antibiotics throughout their lifetime.

6. Can I label my meat as “Hormone Free”?

No, the claim “hormone free” is not approved for use in meat products. All animal and plant cells produce hormones, so hormones are naturally occurring in all meat and many other agricultural food products. Therefore, no meat is hormone free, and the term “Hormone Free” is not approved for use on labels. However, the terms “Raised without added hormones” or “No hormones administered” may be used when the meat is from animals which were never administered additional hormones throughout their life.

7. Can I label my meat as “Grass-Fed”?

Yes, the USDA allows this term to be used when meat is from animals whose diet, post-weaning, was comprised entirely of forage from a pasture or harvested forage. Moreover, the animals were given continuous access to pasture during the growing season.

8. Can I label my meat as “Free-Range”?

Yes, the USDA does not regulate this term for beef production. If the term is used, it must be limited to animals which were never confined to a feedlot.

9. Can I label my meat as “Humanely Raised” or “Humanely Handled”?

Yes, the USDA does not currently have a definition for the claims “humanely raised” or “humanely handled.” Therefore, they are unable to regulate those terms. Producers have the opportunity to enroll in private certification programs governed by a non-governmental third-party, so often meat containing these labels are products of such programs.

10. Can I label my meat as “Sustainably Raised” or “Locally Grown”?

Yes, the USDA does not currently have a definition for the claims “sustainably raised” or “locally grown.” Therefore, they are unable to regulate these terms. For these terms to be meaningful, they should be accompanied by a definition. For example, clarifying the area which would be considered as “local” for the product, or the sustainable practices which were used in the production practices.

11. Can I include a USDA Grade on my meat label?

USDA Quality and Yield Grades (e.g., Prime, Choice, Select, etc. or Yield Grade 1, 2, 3, etc.) can only be assigned by USDA Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS) graders. USDA grading services are a voluntary program, which packers must pay a fee for. USDA Grades are different than USDA Inspection,

which is conducted by the USDA (FSIS) and ensures product wholesomeness. Therefore, meat products may only be labeled as “USDA Choice,” “USDA Yield Grade 1,” etc. if the product was processed in a facility with a USDA grader onsite assigning a USDA Grade.

For more information: O’Quinn, T. G. and L. Nwadike. 2015. Meat product labeling and marketing - what do all those words really mean?. MF3209. Kansas State University Agricultural Experiment Station and Cooperative Extension Service.

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