

# Eco-Labels Demystified

Consumers are constantly bombarded with information about the best, most sustainable, humane, and healthiest products on the market. Meat, dairy, and eggs often carry eco-labels claiming specific sustainability attributes such as “organic,” “grass-fed,” or “raised without antibiotics.” While some labels are quite meaningful, many labels are confusing and poorly defined. Below is a table clarifying some of these labels that will help you purchase livestock products that are better for your health, the environment, and animals.

Label or	Organization or	Meaning	Oversight	Quality <sup>1</sup>
	USDA/Certifying Organizations	Cannot use most synthetic fertilizers or pesticides, no antibiotics, irradiation, or GMOs. Animals must eat 100% organic feed and have access to outdoors (chickens excluded)	Third Party-Certified  The USDA accredits certifying organizations. Farms are inspected annually and certifiers send records to the USDA	Highly meaningful
	Food Alliance	Farmers must use safe and fair working conditions, humane livestock handling, no hormones or non-therapeutic antibiotics, no GMOs, reduce pesticide use, water and soil conservation, habitat protection	Third Party-Certified  Farms and ranches inspected every three years and must submit annual reports	Highly meaningful
	Humane Farm Animal Care	Meat and dairy products raised humanely. No growth hormones or non-therapeutic antibiotics used. Food, living, environmental, and slaughter standards in place as well	Third Party-Certified  Must be inspected and standards must be met before certification is given. USDA verifies inspection process	Highly meaningful
Grass-Fed <sup>2</sup>	USDA/ Manufacturer	Raised on a lifetime 100% grass-fed diet. Must have access to pasture most of the growing season and cannot be fed grain or grain crops	Voluntary Verification	Somewhat meaningful (If USDA verified, highly meaningful)
Raised without antibiotics	Manufacturer	Meat and poultry must not have received any antibiotics	Manufacture declares and USDA can hold accountable	Somewhat meaningful
No hormones administered	Manufacturer	No added hormones during animal's lifetime	Manufacture declares and USDA can hold accountable	Somewhat meaningful
Free-Range	Manufacturer	No definitions have been made for this label other than poultry (broilers). Must be given access to outdoors for undetermined period each day (USDA considers five minutes to be adequate)	Manufactures decides when to use label  Not a verified label	Not meaningful
Natural	Manufacturer	For meat and poultry only. Cannot contain artificial flavoring or coloring, no chemical preservatives or synthetic or artificial ingredients. Minimally processed. <sup>3</sup>	Manufacture declares and USDA can hold accountable, but no verification system in place	Not meaningful

## Additional Resources

**Consumer Reports *Eco-Label Center*:** <http://www.greenerchoices.org/eco-labels/eco-home.cfm>

**Consumers Union:** <http://www.consumersunion.org>

**Food Alliance:** <http://www.foodalliance.org>

**Health Care Without Harm:** <http://www.noharm.org/us/food/issue>

**Humane Farm Animal Care:** <http://www.certifiedhumane.org>

**Oregon Physicians for Social Responsibility:** <http://www.oregonpsr.org>

**United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) :** <http://www.ams.usda.gov/nop>

<sup>1</sup> Meaningfulness definition comes from Consumers Reports/Consumers Union Eco-Label Center and is based on consistency of meaning, public availability of standards behind the label, public availability of information about organization, organization free of conflict of interest, and if the label claim was developed with broad public and industry input.

<sup>2</sup> Products claiming to be USDA Process Verified and U.S. Grass-fed have been verified by the USDA. This means the farm was physically inspected and verified to meet grass-fed standards. Can use claim without verification but company must submit an affidavit of intent to the USDA documenting that their practices meet the standards.

Until November 2007 when the Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS) of the USDA implemented the current definition of grass-fed, claims were overseen by the Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS). Under FSIS there were no standards and no independent verification. Grass-fed claims that were approved by FSIS prior to the AMS definition will be grandfathered in, which means those claims will be overseen by FSIS and do not have to meet the 100% grass-fed standards.

<sup>3</sup>Naturally Raised was recently defined by the USDA to mean that livestock was raised without growth promoters, prohibits animal byproducts in feed, and prohibits most antibiotic use. This definition will be used once it is reviewed by FSIS to ensure minimal confusion with the term "natural." Until then, this definition is not in use.

