

How to Avoid Supporting CAFOs - Deceptive Labeling

How can you avoid inadvertently buying food from CAFOs? Many consumers would like to avoid supporting CAFOs, which is why ‘humanewashing,’ or deceptive labeling, has become common. Many of the terms used to indicate humanely produced items actually have no legal definition. (Scott-Reid, 2021).

Undefined or Deceptive Terms

Marketers have created a wide vocabulary of humane-sounding terms, but if they are not legally defined they are meaningless for animal welfare. And some of the terms that *are* legally defined are far less significant than consumers might assume. For example, according to the ASPCA (2022):

- Natural: Does not impact animal welfare in any way.
- Free-Range: No legal definition for use on eggs, pork, beef or dairy.
- Humanely Raised/Humanely Handled: Undefined and subjective terms without codified standards.
- Cage-Free: On eggs, this label indicates that hens were not raised in battery cages. However, it is an empty claim on poultry meat as meat birds are very rarely raised in cages, and are instead crowded into large, open sheds.
- USDA Organic: This label has vague and poorly enforced regulations for animal rearing, and none at all for transport or slaughter.

As of June, 2022, the USDA has announced upcoming reforms to reduce the use of non-defined animal welfare terms on labels. (ASPCA 2022b).

Label Approval Process

Labels for animal-based foods other than shell eggs, dairy, and fish must be preapproved by the USDA based on an application from the producer. The Animal Welfare Institute found that approximately half of a sample of applications gave inadequate data to support the requested label, but companies’ successful pre-applications shield their labels from both private and federal lawsuits. The approval of a preapplication does not imply that any evaluator has actually verified the conditions on the farm. For shell eggs, dairy, and fish, which are regulated by the FDA, there is no label approval process (Scott-Reid, 2021).

Third-Party Evaluators

Many third-party evaluators have developed labels: some to apply stricter standards of animal welfare, and some for greenwashing. The USDA also provides third party verification through the Agricultural Marketing Service, Process Verified Program (Watkins, Lucas, & Harrington, 2021). Third party verification labels are highly variable in quality, and the Animal Welfare Institute (2022) provides [a long list with details and ratings](#), which can also be downloaded as a pocket guide.

Some of the most commonly recommended third party labels are:

- AMERICAN GRASSFED ASSOCIATION (AGA) CERTIFIED GRASSFED
- ANIMAL WELFARE APPROVED
- CERTIFIED GRASSFED BY ANIMAL WELFARE APPROVED
- CERTIFIED HUMANE (PASTURE-RAISED EGGS)
- GLOBAL ANIMAL PARTNERSHIP
- USDA CERTIFIED ORGANIC
- and for small-scale farmers, CERTIFIED NATURALLY GROWN

Recommended Resource

The ASPCA's site, [The Problem with Factory Farming](#), contains information on reading labels, an interactive web page and phone app to help you generate a CAFO-free shopping list, and links to a help line where you can get information about which brands to purchase – as well as suggestions on how to help improve the availability of humanely raised products. In addition, the [Real Organic Project](#) has been developed to advise the public about the deficiencies in the USDA Organic label, and that site contains [a list of farmers who meet a higher standard](#).

References:

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