

Animal Welfare Group: USDA Fails to Verify Food Label Claims

The Animal Welfare Institute

Washington, DC — A new [report](#) [1] reveals the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) is failing to verify the accuracy of label claims on meat and poultry products sold in the United States.

Released by the Animal Welfare Institute (AWI) today, *Label Confusion: How “Humane” And “Sustainable” Claims On Meat Packages Deceive Consumers* exposes the lack of any apparent verification of food label claims used on millions of meat packages, and calls on USDA to require independent third-party certification to prevent consumers from being misled.

The use of animal welfare and sustainability claims has increased dramatically over the past decade, as consumers become more aware of—and concerned about—the well-being of animals raised for food and the negative impacts of animal agriculture on the environment. The public’s interest in these claims makes them ripe for exploitation by companies wanting to lure the growing number of consumers who seek an alternative to products from factory-farming production systems. To protect consumers from misleading or fraudulent claims, USDA is responsible for evaluating and sanctioning any claims made on labels of meat, poultry and egg products sold to US consumers.

Over the past three years, AWI researched the USDA approval process for a number of key animal welfare and environmental claims, such as “humanely raised” and “sustainably farmed,” focusing exclusively on claims that are not third-party certified. The claims appear on popular “natural” meat and poultry products sold by companies such as Applegate Farms, Crescent Foods, Empire Kosher, FreeBird, Kroger’s Simple Truth store brand, A&P’s Mid-Atlantic Country Farms store brand, Niman Ranch, Petaluma Poultry, and Plainville Farms.

AWI found that only two of the claims approved by USDA were substantiated by anything more than a brief statement by the producer—and over 80 percent of the label claims *were backed by no supporting evidence whatsoever*. This lack of government oversight allows for the use of deceptive labels—confusing consumers and threatening the livelihoods of higher-welfare farmers who have earned the right to use these claims.

“Based on the records we obtained from the department itself, it appears that USDA is merely rubber stamping applications for these claims,” says Dena Jones, AWI’s farm animal program manager and lead author of the report. “There seems to be no requirement whatsoever for substantiation of the claims.”

In a recent [public opinion survey](#) [2] on meat labeling commissioned by AWI, almost

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90 percent of consumers stated that producers should have to prove any claims like “humanely raised” and “sustainably farmed” on labels, while a majority of consumers believe that a brief statement (signed affidavit) from a producer is not acceptable proof of farming practices.

AWI has submitted a [rulemaking petition](#) [3] requesting that USDA require independent third-party certification of humane and sustainable claims. “Until USDA makes significant changes to its approval process, consumers should be wary of any meat products whose label includes an animal welfare or environmental claim that is not accompanied by a statement or logo indicating an independent third party verified the claim,” said Jones.

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Links:

[1] <https://awionline.org/sites/default/files/uploads/documents/foodlabel/AWI-FA-FoodLabelReport-05072014.pdf>

[2] <https://awionline.org/sites/default/files/uploads/documents/fa-meatlabelingpoll-041714.pdf>

[3] <https://awionline.org/sites/default/files/uploads/documents/foodlabel/AWI-FA-FSISFoodLabelRulemakingPetition-05062014.pdf>