



Labeling Beef....What Does All This Mean?

Natural

Part 1 of 3

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The term natural is one of the most broadly defined labeling terms that is governed by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS). Consumer perceptions of what “natural” means and what USDA says that it means can have varying degrees of constancy. Results from the 2004 National Meat Case Study indicated that only 2% of whole muscle cuts and 7% of ground beef packages had a “natural” labeling on them. The 2007 extension of the National Meat Case Study showed a 100% increase in whole muscle cuts carrying a “natural” label, increasing from 2% in 2004 to 4% in 2007. The number of ground beef packages with a “natural” label showed an even greater growth rate, increasing by 257%, from 7% in 2004 to 27% in 2007.

In order to be approved for a “natural” labeling claim the product may not have any artificial ingredients such as color, preservatives, or flavor. The product may not be more than minimally processed, for example, the product may be ground and still be labeled as “natural”. USDA highly recommends that producers state, on the label, what exactly is meant by the term “natural” for each particular case.

Even as standards, by USDA definition, are very broad and encompass most fresh beef that is produced in the U.S., it is important to note that many people’s perceptions, including those of the typical consumer, believe that “natural” has more restrictions than are currently imposed by USDA. A **typical** natural beef program, as described by Tom Troxel, beef extension specialist from University of Arkansas, would not include the use of antibiotics, ionophores, implants and feed containing byproducts. Most natural programs do allow the use of non-organic feeds, however; since each program is regulated by the specific branding program, programs requirements can vary. For certification, producers are generally required to sign an affidavit. Because programs can differ in so many ways from each other, it is so important to tell consumers exactly what is meant by the term “natural”.

As of July 2007, USDA is developing more specific definitions for “natural” labeling to be used on meat products USDA officials expect the new regulations to be effective by the end of 2008.

In order to be approved for an animal raising labeling claim, USDA-FSIS form 7234-1 must be completed and approved by the FSIS. Animal raising claims include claims about the use of antibiotics, ionophores, implants and feed byproducts. The process includes evaluation of all labeling claims, providing sufficient supporting documentation, and updating files. Labeling

applications are submitted in triplicate and accompanied by supporting documentation which includes, but is not limited to:

- ✓ Operational protocol-describes production practices in detail
- ✓ Affidavits and testimonials-from producers
- ✓ Feed ration formulas-from producer or feed company
- ✓ Certificates-certified organic ingredients

If fraud or misrepresentation of any kind is suspected concerning labeling claims on your product a compliance form will be issued by the FSIS. Your product is subject to lab testing as well as inspection by USDA inspectors and/or compliance officers. Producers should know that routine inspection by USDA inspectors and/or compliance officers is legal and does happen. If inspectors or compliance officers find conflict between product and product claims, consequences could include fines, product withdrawal, or stopped label use

This information sheet has been submitted, but not reviewed by USDA Food Safety Inspection Service. All information is deemed correct and accurate to the best ability of the author and reviewers, based on information utilized at the time of their review.

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