



USDA General Label Requirements for Meat Products

Jennifer Dutton

Center for Profitable Agriculture

Some livestock producers are interested in adding value to their livestock by marketing meat products. There are many regulatory issues to consider before starting to market meat products. This fact sheet is intended to provide information on the general labeling requirements that apply to all meat products.

Labeling of meat products is governed by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Food Safety Inspection Service (FSIS). Producers must develop a label following specific guidelines and have it approved by FSIS before the label is used on products intended for sale. There are up to eight mandatory requirements for meat product labels, however, some products are exempt from ingredients statement and nutrition labeling if they meet certain criteria as outlined by USDA.

The eight specific requirements for meat product labels are:

- 1) Product name (cut name)
- 2) Inspection legend and establishment number
- 3) Handling statement
- 4) Net weight
- 5) Address line (signature line)
- 6) Safe handling instructions
- 7) Ingredients statement
- 8) Nutrition facts

Figure 1 and 2, show examples of a label that has been approved by the FSIS. This label was designed by Sodium Halogen Graphic Design or a value-added farm enterprise in west Tennessee. This label is provided with permission¹ for instructional purposes and not as a sample. DO NOT reproduce all or any part of this label without the artist's permission.

¹ Permission for use of the label depicted in Figure 1 by Andrew Donnell of Donnell Century Farms.

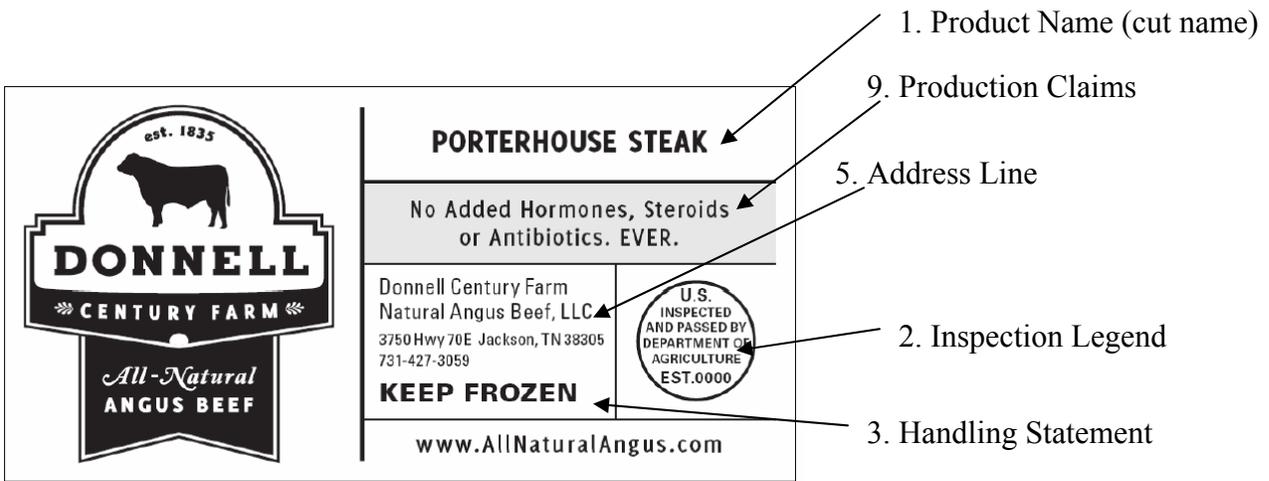


Figure 1. Example Product Label

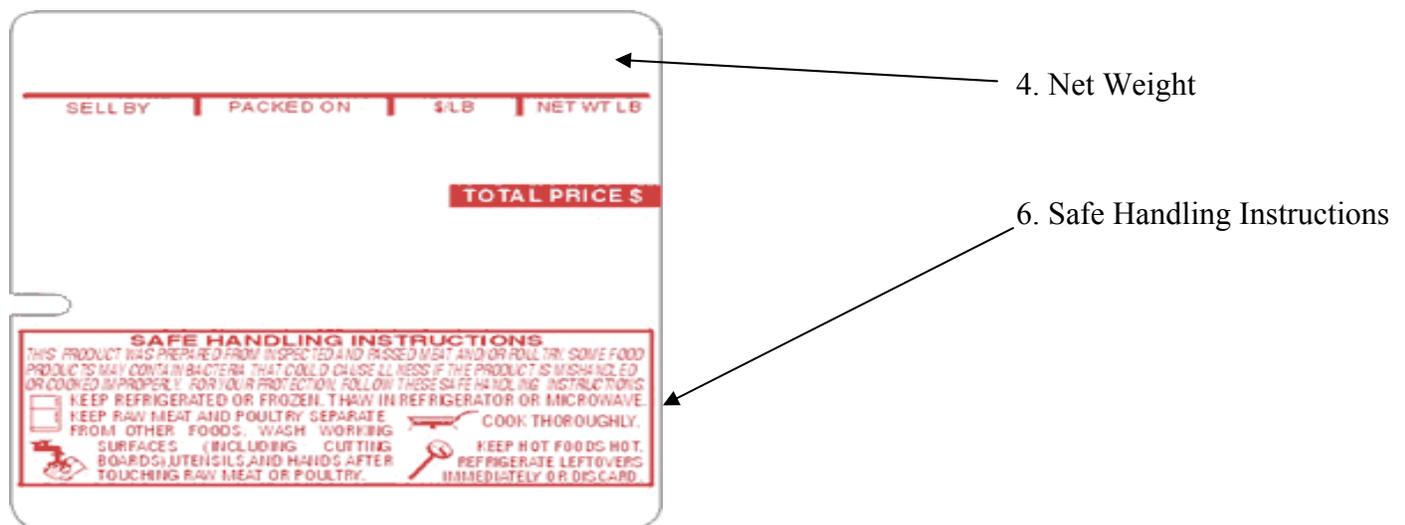


Figure 2: Example Safe Handling Instructions Label for Principal Display Panel (PDP)

1. Product Name – The product name must reflect the common or usual name if there is one. This generally occurs when labeling meat products (i.e. beef round, beef sirloin steak, porterhouse steak etc.). The words in the product name may be different sizes, colors and font types as long as all words are prominent, conspicuous and legible. USDA states that “prominent, conspicuous and legible” means that it would be likely to be read and understood by the ordinary consumer under normal purchasing conditions. Product names should appear on the Principal Display Panel (PDP²).

2. Inspection Legend and Establishment Number – The inspection legend is used to indicate that the carcass or parts of a carcass (individual retail cuts) were inspected and passed in accordance to all federal regulations. The establishment number identifies the specific USDA-inspected plant where the product was processed. A sample inspection legend is shown in Figure 1. The size of the inspection legend does not have to be identical to the sample shown, but the same proportion of letter size and bold type must be maintained. In other words, the inspection label may be made

² USDA defines the principal display panel (PDP) is the part of the label that is most likely to be displayed, presented, be seen, or examined under normal conditions to the consumer. The PDP should include product name, net weight, inspection legend and establishment number and handling statement.

smaller to fit on your label, but the components should not be changed within the inspection legend.



Figure 3: Sample of the USDA official inspection legend approved for cattle, sheep, swine and goats

3. Handling Statement – Products that require special handling in order to maintain their wholesome condition (not spoil) must have a statement prominently displayed on the label. Such statements might read, “Keep Refrigerated,” “Keep Frozen,” or “Perishable – Keep Refrigerated or Frozen.”

4. Net Weight – Weight statements must be made in terms of the product (i.e. solid for meat products). Weights must be taken on certified scales. There are more specific guidelines as to how the net weight should be shown on a label, including:

- Be displayed in lines that are parallel to the base of the container
- Be contrasted with other material on the package
- Be separated from other information printed either above or below net weight statement that is at least equal to the height of the lettering used for the statement
- Be separated from information printed to the right or the left of it by twice the width of the letter “N.”

In addition to these guidelines there are minimum font size requirements that must be met when printing the product’s net weight on the label. Minimum font size requirements are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Minimum Font Size for Net Weight

Area of PDP (sq. inches)	Minimum Font Size (inches)
≤5	1/16
> 5-25	1/8
> 25-100	3/16
> 100-400	1/4
> 400	1/2

5. Address (Signature) Line – Labels for meat must include the name of the place of business for the manufacturer, packer or distributor. The manufacturer and packer must only list their name on the product label. Distributor’s name must be preceded by “Prepared for.....” or “Distributed by” If the business is listed in a telephone or city directory only the city, state, and zip code have to be included with the name of the distributor on the product label. If the business is not listed in a directory a street address must be included on the label. Farmers that are direct marketing the meat products are considered and may be listed on the label as the distributors.

6. Safe Handling Instructions – Safe handling instructions are required on the product label if the meat product is raw or partially cooked and intended for household consumer or institutional use. If the product is considered ready-to-eat (RTE) then safe handling instructions should be omitted from the label. “Safe Handling Instructions” should appear as a heading and be followed by the language as written below:

This product was prepared from inspected and passed meat and/or poultry. Some food products may contain bacteria that could cause illness if the product is mishandled or cooked improperly. For your protection, follow these safe handling instructions.

- *Keep refrigerated or frozen. Thaw in refrigerator or microwave. (This statement must appear next to a graphic illustration of a refrigerator.)*
- *Keep raw meat and poultry separate from other foods. Wash working surfaces (including cutting boards), utensils, and hands after touching raw meat or poultry. (This statement must appear next to a graphic illustration of soapy hands under a faucet.)*
- *Cook thoroughly. (This statement must appear next to a graphic illustration of a skillet.)*
- *Keep hot foods hot. Refrigerate leftovers immediately or discard. (This statement must appear next to a graphic illustration of a thermometer.)*

The font size must not be smaller than 1/16 inch tall and be placed where it can be seen easily by the purchaser. Additionally, the safe handling instructions must be set off from other information by a border and be of uniform color on a contrasting, single-color background. The heading must be a larger font size than the handling instructions. FSIS does permit changes to the language of the statements IF specific product handling information conflicts with the safe handling instructions shown above. For example, if the label of a frozen product states, “Do not thaw product, cook from frozen,” the first part of the safe handling statement can be changed to “Keep frozen.” Figure 4 shows an example of safe handling instructions.

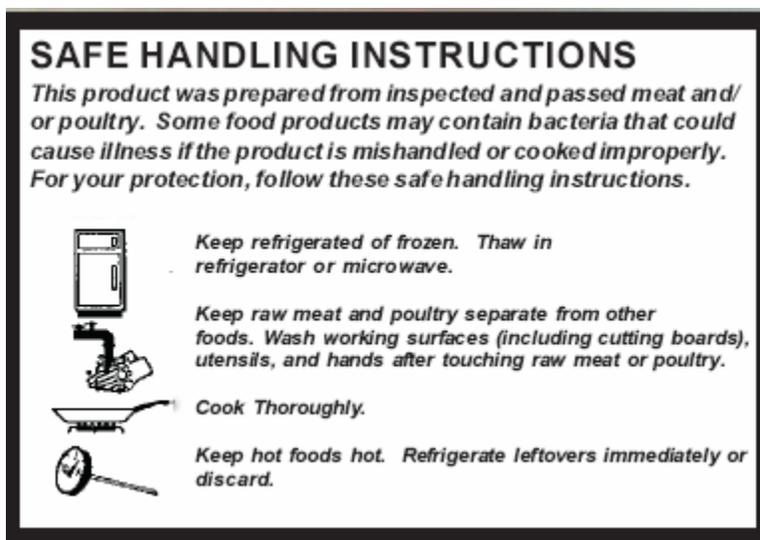


Figure 4: Safe Handling Instructions for Meat Products

7. Ingredients Statement – An ingredients statement is required when the product consists of two or more ingredients. Ingredients must be listed in descending order of proportion by weight and be identified by their common or usual name. Most fresh or frozen meat products will not require an ingredients statement because they consist of a single ingredient.

8. Nutritional Facts – Nutrition labeling is required for all meat products intended for human consumption *except* single-ingredient, raw products and other exempt products. Other exempt products include products produced by small businesses³, products intended for further processing, products not for sale to consumers⁴, products prepared and sold at retail and products in packages smaller than ½ ounce net weight. Many meat products will consist of a single ingredient (meat) and will be exempt from mandatory nutritional labeling on this basis. Some products that may require nutritional facts include marinated roasts or jerky.

9. Production Claims - In addition to the required elements of a label, some producers may want to differentiate their product further by using production claims (i.e. natural, grassfed, organic, no added antibiotics/hormones etc.). This topic is not addressed in this fact sheet, but is an option available to farmers. More information can be found in CPA Info Sheet #93, “*Meat Marketing: The Use of Animal Raising Claims and Natural*” and CPA Info Sheet # 149, “*Labeling Beef... What Does All This Mean?*”(A three part series).

It should be noted that this information is intended only as a guide for producers. 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.

Programs in agriculture and natural resources, 4-H youth development, family and consumer sciences, and resource development. University of Tennessee Institute of Agriculture, U.S. Department of Agriculture and county governments cooperating. UT Extension provides equal opportunities in programs and employment.

³ A small business is defined as a business employing fewer than 500 employees and produces less than 100,000 pounds of product per year.

⁴ Products not for sale to consumers include products such as a free sauce packet with egg rolls. If the packet is included in the egg roll's net weight or is not free, nutritional labeling would be required.