Green America®

GMOINSIDE.ORG
Campaign Powered by Green America

The ABCs of Food Labeling

From 100% Organic to Vegetarian-fed, the multitude of food labels and certifications can leave you standing in the grocery aisle scratching your head. Corporations know that compassionate and concerned consumers are looking for assurance that their food is sourced ethically and sustainably. Unfortunately, not all labels are created equal, leaving consumers unsure of which to trust.

So how do you sort the fact from fiction and get to the bottom of how your food is produced? Fortunately, there are several legitimate certifications that have high standards for animal welfare and environmental practices. These typically ensure compliance through audits and inspections. Below is a comprehensive list of common food labels, rated based on how well they adhere to the standards they claim to ensure.

The ratings also account for how well the label guarantees good overall applicable environmental practices, animal stewardship, and/or animal welfare. Because labels have specific focus areas, such as labor conditions, animal welfare, or presence of GMOs, it is a good idea to look for multiple trustworthy labels on products that cover the spectrum of food issues. If you would like more information about how we rated the labels, please refer to page 6.

Purchasing foods with meaningful labels is a great way to support producers who are using the highest environmental, labor, and animal welfare practices. It's a way to ensure that farmers are getting fair payments for operating at the highest standards.

From now on, when you see a label you aren't sure about, you can consult this helpful, alphabetical list that is grouped into three categories (environmental concerns, animal welfare, and human wellbeing). Just keep a printed copy with your reusable grocery bags or access the list from your phone.

If you have your smart phone at the store, there are some other resources you should know about. Animal Welfare Alliance has an app that exposes whether animal product labels are trustworthy. Label Lookup and Non-GMO Project Shopping Guide are apps that serve a similar function for packaged goods. The app Locavore helps you find farmers markets and locally produced food near you. Happy Shopping!

RATING KEY

★★★★★ **5 stars** Standards honestly reflect claims label is making. Ensures best possible environmental, animal welfare, and human welfare practices

★★★★☆ **4 stars** Standards honestly reflect claims label is making. Ensures very good environmental and/or animal welfare and/or human welfare practices

★★★☆☆ **3 stars** Standards honestly reflect claims label is making. Moderate improvement over conventional environmental and/or animal welfare and/or human welfare practices

★★☆☆☆ **2 stars** Standards support claim label is making. Minimal improvement over conventional environmental and/or animal welfare and/or human welfare practices

★☆☆☆☆ **1 star** Standards somewhat support claim label is making. No meaninful improvement over conventional environmental and/or animal welfare and/or human welfare practices

☆☆☆☆☆ **0 stars** A label used to deceive people that has no meaning and is not verified

Animal Welfare Labels

American Grassfed Approved

American Grassfed®

★★★★★

- American Grass Fed Association establishes standards, compliance is ensured by FSIS (Food Safety and Inspection Services) of the USDA
- Animals are fed a 100-percent forage diet and are never confined to feed lots
- Animals are never fed antibiotics or hormones and are born and raised on American family farms
- Third party audits assure compliance

American Humane Certified

American Humane CERTIFIED®

★☆☆☆☆

- Certification given by Humane Heartland after an application and audit
- Does not require pasture time for animals, permits cages, allows beak-cutting
- Concerns have been raised regarding audits and not putting limits on the distance live farm animals can be transported (a traumatic experience for animals)

Animal Welfare Labels, cont.

Animal Welfare Approved

- Animal Welfare Approved (AWA) audits, certifies, and supports farmers
- AWA is a non-profit organization and does not charge farmers to become certified
- Audits are done once a year to ensure compliance
- Animals have continuous access to pasture or range and are not put on feedlots
- Cage confinement, hormones, and preventative or growth-promoting antibiotics not allowed

Antibiotic-free

- This label is not certified by the USDA

Raised Without Antibiotics/No Antibiotics Administered/Added

- The USDA grants these labels if it is verified that animals were not given antibiotics during their lives

Cage-Free

- Cage-free labels do not require any third-party certification
- Cages are prohibited but animals are not required to have access to sunlight, animals can be tightly crowded with movement restricted
- Allows beak-cutting and starvation-based forced molting
- Does not regulate feed or antibiotic use

Certified Humane Raised and Handled

- Humane Farm Animal Care (HFAC) is a non-profit organization that verifies this certification
- Continuous outdoor access required for ruminants (cattle, goats, and sheep)
- Outdoor access not required for birds and pigs unless the words "free range" or "pasture'" also appear on the package
- If indoors, adequate bedding, space, and enrichment are provided for birds and pigs
- Cage confinement, hormones, and non-therapeutic antibiotics are prohibited
- Feed lots with standards better than conventional feed lots are allowed for limited periods of time

Farm Fresh

- Not regulated by a third-party verifier, no relevance to animal welfare

Free-Range/Free-Roaming (USDA)

- The term free-range is not regulated by the USDA except when applied to chickens and turkeys raised for meat
- It must be verified that animals have "access to the outdoors" but the quality of this access is not specified so it could be a very small space for a very short time. Conditions of farms with this label vary greatly
- Does not regulate feed

Humanely Local

One of the best ways to know what animal stewardship practices were involved in producing your food is to meet your farmer! Buying meat, dairy, and eggs at your local farmer's market, or through a CSA, allows you to have a conversation with the farmers that produce your food. You can ask them questions about humane practices and support local, ethical farms.

Animal Welfare Labels, cont.

Global Animal Partnership (GAP)

★★★★★

- The Global Animal Partnership (GAP) has a 6-step rating program for animals raised for meat (this does not include eggs and milk)
- The higher the step (1 is the lowest, 6 is the highest), the stricter the requirements for animal welfare. The steps build on each other encompassing the standards of the steps preceding them
- Hormones and non-therapeutic antibiotics are prohibited at all steps
- Standards extend to transport but not breeding animals or slaughter
- Audits ensure compliance

Grain-Fed

- Feeding ruminants grain instead of vegetation causes severe digestive problems

Grass-Fed

- The USDA grass-fed label has been withdrawn and farms applying to the program will no longer be verified
- There are no existing regulations for ensuring Grass-Fed claims are factual

Humanely raised/Humanely handled

- The USDA does not define or regulate these terms
- Check for third-party verified labels listed below for meaningful animal welfare claims

Naturally Raised

- The USDA does not define or regulate this term

No hormones added/No hormones administered (USDA)

★★

- This label is certified by the USDA. The pork and poultry industries do not allow the administration of hormones
- Producers must prove no hormones were administered during the animal's life
- No relevance to any other aspects of animal welfare

Pasture Raised/Pasture-Grown/Pastured

- There are no legal definitions for these terms, companies can put this label on their products without third-party verification

Validus Animal Welfare Certified

★

- Validus is an independent certification company that claims to ensure food is produced in a socially responsible way. It is a USDA processed verified program
- The certification affirms that an operation has meant its internally established animal welfare standards
- Validus' Animal Welfare Review certification does not address hormone-use, antibiotic-use, feed type, or access to the outdoors

Environmental Concerns Labels

100% USDA Organic

- USDA National Organic Program (NOP) sets regulations and labeling requirements
- Verification guaranteed by annual unannounced or announced inspections, investigations of complaints, and enforcement penalties
- 100% organic labeled products must contain only organically produced ingredients and processing aids not including water and salt
- Organic ingredients are grown, handled, and processed without the use of pesticides or other synthetic chemicals and fertilizers
- Bioengineering is not permitted, so that means no GE (genetically engineered) ingredients
- The USDA organic certification does allow for monoculture crop production and the required animal welfare standards could be stronger, but have recently improved

B Corp Certification

- The B Corp certification is a third-party certification verified by B Lab, a non-profit organization
- B Corp ensures its members have high standards for environmental and social responsibility
- B Corp companies must commit to take steps to improve the treatment of their employees, their community, and the environment

Certified Transitional Organic

- Independently verified by QAI (Quality Assurance International) through step-by-step benchmarks and inspections
- This certification helps farmers transition from conventional to organic practices by creating a better market for their products while they are transitioning, allowing them to pay the costs of going organic
- Farms will have three years under the label to become USDA certified organic, with each year having specific benchmarks farms must meet along the way
- This will create more organic acreage by giving farmers the financial security to transition to better practices

Demeter Certified Biodynamic

- This is a certification given by Demeter Association Inc. that requires farmers to apply and then pass inspections
- Farmers must follow biodynamic principles, meaning the soil, plants, animals, and humans must work together as a holistic organism
- On-farm recycling of nutrients and composting must be demonstrated. Farms must have minimal dependence on outside sources for synthetic fertilizers and pest control. Conscientious water conservation and the setting aside of land for biodiversity are practiced

Made with Organic Ingredients

- USDA National Organic Program (NOP) sets regulations and labeling requirements
- Verification guaranteed by annual unannounced or announced inspections, investigations of complaints, and enforcement penalties
- Processed products that contain at least 70% organic ingredients
- Organic ingredients are grown, handled and processed without the use of pesticides or other synthetic chemicals and fertilizers
- Bioengineering is not permitted, that means no GE (genetically engineered) ingredients
- Remaining 30% of ingredients must be from USDA approved list
- The USDA organic certification does allow for monoculture crop production and the required animal welfare standards could be stronger, but have recently improved

Natural

- The USDA states that products should not contain artificial ingredients or added colors and must be minimally processed. Manufacturers should define their use of the term on the packages
- Beyond the definition above there is no set standard or enforcement mechanism

Non-GMO (Unverified)

- Beware of non-GMO claims that are unverified. If a label has any GMO claims that are not verified by the USDA, the Non-GMO Project or NSF's True North, it is not backed by any standard.

Environmental Concerns Labels, cont.

Non-GMO Project Verified

- Trustworthy third-party verified certification that guarantees products do not contain genetically engineered ingredients above a set threshold
- GMO contamination must be below .25% for seeds, .9% for food and skin products, 1.5% for cleaning products and textiles, and 5% for animal feed and supplements
- Compliance is ensured through analytical testing and corrective actions

NSF Non-GMO True North

- Standards enforced by National Science Foundation (NSF) through unannounced audits
- Products verified by NSF Non-GMO True North contain less than .9% GE contents or less than 5% for feed
- Regulates feed for livestock, ensuring feed from GE crops is not used through the lifecycle
- Compliance is ensured through analytical testing and corrective accounts

Organic

- USDA National Organic Program (NOP) sets regulations and labeling requirements
- Verification guaranteed by annual announced or unannounced inspections, investigations of complaints, and enforcing penalties
- Must contain at least 95% ingredients produced organically excluding water and salt
- Organic ingredients are grown, handled and processed without the use of pesticides or other synthetic chemicals and fertilizers
- Bioengineering is not permitted, product does not contain any GE ingredients.
- Remaining 5% of ingredients must be from a USDA approved list
- The organic certification does allow for monoculture crop production and the required animal welfare standards could be stronger, but have recently improved

Rainforest Alliance Certified/UTZ

- Sustainable Agriculture Network (SAN) sets criteria for products to be certified
- This certification emphasizes the yield of farmers and has no guaranteed price paid to farmers
- Prohibits child labor and has an environmental component that addresses biodiversity, natural resources conservation, and sustainable agriculture
- Allows multi-ingredient products to be certified without making it clear what percentage of ingredients are certified. Look for single ingredient products, like coffee beans, with this label

Salmon Safe

- The "Salmon Safe" label is put on products that are produced in a way that minimizes pollution in rivers and wetlands to protect native salmon
- This includes limiting pesticides, better irrigation practices, and planting trees by rivers.
- These products are verified by a third-party (Salmon-Safe)

Sustainably Grown Certified

- Certified by SCS Global Services, a third-party environmental and sustainability organization that audits, tests, and provides standards
- This certification holds members to a comprehensive set of environmental, social, and economic requirements that ensure agricultural crops were grown in a sustainable manner
- The standards aim to ensure fair working conditions, healthy farm communities, no use of dangerous agrochemicals and ecosystem conservation

Organic is *always* Non-GMO

REMEMBER: When a food is labeled USDA organic that means it cannot be produced using genetic engineering (GE) or use ingredients derived from GE crops. Shop carefully when buying corn, soy alfalfa, sugar, canola, cotton, papaya, zucchini, and summer squash, as well as animal products, which most often come from animals that have been fed GE crops. Unless organic, these items are most likely derived from genetic engineering. Organic certification goes beyond non-gmo certification to address other key components of sustainable agriculture.

Human Welfare Labels

FairTrade International/FairTrade America

★★★★☆

- Certified by third-party inspector FLOCERT, which regularly audits participants
- This certification ensures a fair price is paid to small farmers and a Fair Trade premium is paid, which goes towards the development of the local community
- Crops are raised sustainably without GMOs, pesticide use is reduced though standards are not as strict as organic
- FairTrade International only certifies cooperatives
- FairTrade certified products are mostly food items (coffee, tea, chocolate, bananas, rice etc.)
- Has stringent regulations for the ingredient contents within a FairTrade product, if an ingredient is available under the FairTrade standard it cannot be substituted for a conventional variety

Fair Trade USA

★★★☆☆

- Certified by SCS Global Services (SCS) a third-party independent verifier which enforces standards and compliance criteria developed by Fair Trade USA
- Ensures products (most commonly coffee, chocolate, bananas, tea, and sugar) are produced free of forced labor or poor working conditions
- Establishes a minimum price for goods, so small farmers do not fall prey to market fluctuations
- Does allow for the certification of large farms or plantations as well as corporate owned farms and/or plantations
- Does allow for the use of non-Fair Trade ingredients within a product despite the existence of a Fair Trade version

Fair for Life

★★★★☆

- Certified by the Institute of Marketecology (IMO), an independent third-party certification which specializes in international inspections of environmental and social standards
- This product certification is based on a non-product-specific standard. Food and non-food products alike from raw materials to the finished product can be certified. Fair for Life also certifies entire companies
- Ensures fair and positive practices between producers and the companies that purchase from them

How we rated the labels

1. First, we considered whether the label evaluates a practice that could lead to measurable benefits. For example, organic labels are certifying practices that prohibit the use of synthetic chemicals and therefore seek to reduce impacts on the environment and human health. This leads to measurable benefits. By contrast, "farm fresh" is meaningless since it does not define practices that create any measurable benefits.

2. We then looked at whether the label represents a legal or regulatory standard that is clearly defined. For example, the USDA organic standards are clearly defined by the USDA, and those standards are publicly available. By contrast, the words "naturally raised" are not regulated, and are meaningless.

3. We then considered whether the standards set forth by the label are subjected to third-party certification or audit. The use of an outside certifier and/or auditor helps to prevent greenwashing that can easily occur with self-regulated labeling.

Labels that received the highest marks from Green America (4 to 5 stars) are those that scored the highest on the criteria above.

Green America®

GMOINSIDE.ORG
Campaign Powered by Green America