



# 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 human 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 9.

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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 concerns, and human welfare). 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. A Greener World's [Food Labels Exposed](#) guide decodes over 100 food labels and claims. [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/or 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 meaningful improvement over conventional environmental and/or animal welfare and/or human welfare practices



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

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# Animal Concerns Labels

## American Grassfed Approved



- \* American Grass Fed Association established the 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 US family farms.
- \* Third-party audits assure compliance.



## American Humane Certified



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



## Certified Animal Welfare Approved by AGW



- \* A Greener World (AGW) audits, certifies, and supports farmers.
- \* AGW is a non-profit organization and does not charge farmers for AWA certification.
- \* 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 are prohibited.



## Antibiotic-Free



- \* Use of this claim is not backed by any standard.
- \* This claim can be verified through the USDA Process Verified program. The USDA Process Verified program is a verification of paperwork and does not require an audit.



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## Raised Without Antibiotics/No Antibiotics Administered/Added



- \* The USDA grants these labels if it receives documentation that animals were not given antibiotics during their lives.
- \* This label does not require a physical audit or third-party assessment and is granted solely from a signed affidavit.



## 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.



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# Animal Concerns Labels, cont.

## Certified Grassfed by AGW



- \* **Certified Grassfed** is a standard from A Greener World (AGW), a non-profit organization, that also developed the Animal Welfare Approved standard.
- \* This **standard** can not stand alone and can only be applied in addition to the Animal Welfare Approved standard.
- \* The standard is 100% grass/forage based and compliance to the standard is monitored through audits.
- \* AGW encourages sustainable pasture management with attention to plant biodiversity.
- \* The grassfed standard and allowed exceptions to the standard are set to ensure the highest level of animal welfare.

## 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 on farms with this label vary greatly.
- \* Does not regulate feed.

## Global Animal Partnership (GAP)



- \* The Global Animal Partnership (GAP) has a 5+-step rating program for animals raised for meat (this does not include eggs and milk).
- \* The higher the step (1 is the lowest, 5+ is the highest), the stricter the requirements for animal welfare and the more natural the animals’ environment. The steps build on each other encompassing the standards of the steps preceding them.
- \* It is important to note that the 5-star rating is for GAP Step 6.
- \* Added hormones and antibiotics are prohibited at all steps.
- \* Standards are comprehensive including breeding stock (placement for poultry) through to slaughter for all animals except beef, and laying hens.
- \* Requires audits on every farm every 15 months to ensure compliance. — no group, or sampling protocols permitted.

## 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 (community supported agriculture), 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 Concerns Labels, cont.

## Grain-Fed



- \* Feeding ruminants grain instead of vegetation causes severe digestive problems and increases the likelihood of infection contributing to the increased use of antibiotics.



## Grass-Fed



- \* The USDA grass-fed label has been withdrawn and farms applying to the program will no longer be verified.



## 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)

NO ADDED HORMONES



- \* This label is allowed by the USDA. It should be noted that administration of hormones is illegal for pork and poultry, so the claim is meaningless on those products.
- \* Producers must attest 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.



## Pennsylvania Certified Organic 100% Grassfed



- \* This certification uses the USDA organic standard as its baseline and ensures that ruminants are 100% grassfed, above and beyond the USDA organic standard for time on pasture.
- \* This is a third-party verification of products that are sourced from animals raised on pasture.



## Validus Animal Welfare Certified



- \* Certifications hold accreditations from ISO 9001:2005, PAACO, USDA PVP and USDA ISO TS 34700 Animal Welfare Assessment Programs.
- \* Standards are owned and administered by Validus, an independent certification company, but governed by external expert advisory committees.
- \* Certification affirms that an operation has met the published Validus animal welfare standards with yearly on-site audits of each location to ensure compliance.
- \* 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 allows for monoculture crop production.
- \* The organic certification does not represent the highest standard in animal welfare. In order to ensure high animal welfare it is best to purchase products where USDA organic is accompanied by a credible third-party animal welfare certification.

## 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 have three years under the label to become USDA certified organic, with each year having specific benchmarks farms must meet along the way.
- \* This creates more organic acreage by giving farmers the financial security to transition to better practices.

## Certified Non-GMO by AGW



- \* [Certified Non-GMO](#) is a standard from the organization A Greener World (AGW), who is also behind the Animal Welfare Approved standard.
- \* This standard can not stand alone and can only be applied in addition to the Animal Welfare Approved standard.
- \* The [Certified Non-GMO](#) standard applies to livestock feed and inputs; ensuring a product is non-GMO throughout the entire supply chain.
- \* AGW requires regular testing.

## 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.



# Environmental Concerns Labels

## 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.
- \* Includes products that contain at least 70% organic ingredients.
- \* Remaining 30% of ingredients must be from USDA approved list.
- \* 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. The standard allows for monoculture crop production.
- \* The organic certification does not represent the highest standard in animal welfare. In order to ensure high animal welfare it is best to purchase products where USDA organic is accompanied by a credible third-party animal welfare certification.

## 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 (which is only applicable to meat products and is not verified) 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 supported by the USDA or a third-party verification the claim is not backed by any standard.
- \* It is best to look for a third-party verification, as the USDA does not include animal feed in its non-GMO requirements; meaning that an animal product can be considered non-GMO even if it was fed GMO crops. The only way to ensure that a product was non-GMO through the entire supply chain is through a third-party verification.

## 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.

Organic  
is  
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. However, organic does not require testing for the presence of GMOs. In order to ensure that there is not GE material in your food, you should purchase products that are organic and have a third-party non-GMO certification.

# Environmental Concerns Labels, cont.

## 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 0.9% GE content or less than 5% for feed.
- \* Regulates feed for livestock, ensuring feed from GE crops is not used throughout an animal's 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. Remaining 5% of ingredients must be from a USDA approved list.
- \* 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. The organic certification allows for monoculture crop production.
- \* The organic certification does not represent the highest standard in animal welfare. In order to ensure high animal welfare it is best to purchase products where USDA organic is accompanied by a credible third-party animal welfare certification.



## Rainforest Alliance Certified/UTZ



- \* Sustainable Agriculture Network (SAN) sets criteria for products to be certified.
- \* [This certification](#) emphasizes yield 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 with this label, such as coffee beans.



## 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, improving irrigation practices, and planting trees by rivers.
- \* These products are verified by a [third-party](#).



## Sustainably Grown Certified



- \* Certified by [SCS Global Services](#), a third-party organization that provides environmental and sustainability verification, certification, auditing, testing, and standards development.
- \* This certification addresses a broad range of environmental, social, and economic sustainability issues pertaining to crop production. (Note: this standard does not address animal husbandry or welfare).
- \* Specific environmental protection issues addressed include production system parameters, soil and water resources, air quality, climate change, ecosystem protection, energy efficiency, and waste management.
- \* Social responsibility requirements cover work agreements, wages and benefits, working hours, child labor, non-discrimination and freedom of association, human resource management, health and safety, and community relations.
- \* Economic sustainability issues addressed include business accounting and reporting, continuity and resilience, community economic engagement, and product quality and safety.



# 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 smallholder 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** and poor working conditions.
- \* Establishes a minimum price for goods, so smallholder farmers do not fall prey to market fluctuations.
- \* Allows for the certification of large farms or plantations as well as corporate owned farms and/or plantations.
- \* Allows 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 certifier, 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 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.



## Sustainably Grown Certified



- \* Certified by **SCS Global Services**, a third-party organization that provides environmental and sustainability verification, certification, auditing, testing, and standards development.
- \* This certification addresses a broad range of environmental, social, and economic sustainability issues pertaining to crop production. (Note: this standard does not address animal husbandry or welfare).
- \* Specific environmental protection issues addressed include production system parameters, soil and water resources, air quality, climate change, ecosystem protection, energy efficiency, and waste management.
- \* Social responsibility requirements cover work agreements, wages and benefits, working hours, child labor, non-discrimination and freedom of association, human resource management, health and safety, and community relations.
- \* Economic sustainability issues addressed include business accounting and reporting, continuity and resilience, community economic engagement, and product quality and safety.





# About Green America

## Our Mission

Our mission is to harness economic power—the strength of consumers, investors, businesses, and the marketplace—to create a socially just and environmentally sustainable society.

## Green America's Food Programs

Green America's Food Programs work to increase regenerative agriculture and organic agriculture, and to reduce the use of GMOs and toxic chemicals. Our goal is to end industrial agriculture practices that destroy the soil, and harm the health of the planet and consumers. Our Food Programs include:

- \* **Re(sotre) It!** - educates consumers on the benefits of regenerative agriculture and its roll in climate change mitigation. Regenerative agriculture uses practices that pull carbon from the air and transfer it underground—storing carbon and re(storing) agricultural soils.
- \* **Climate Victory Gardens** - calls on all gardeners to shift their garden practices towards principles of regenerative agriculture so that they can be a meaningful part of reversing climate change and sequestering carbon into the soil. We can start fighting climate change in our home, school, and community gardens today!
- \* **GMO Inside** - educates consumers and businesses about the impacts of industrial agriculture and genetically modified organisms (GMOs) on the food system, the environment, health, and the economy. Our goal is the shift major corporations away from reliance on GMOs, and towards more sustainable production practices.
- \* **Center for Sustainability Solutions** - creates collaborative networks of actors throughout the supply chain to advance carbon farming and non-GMO food supplies.



Learn More at [GreenAmerica.org](http://GreenAmerica.org)

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# 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 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 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.*



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