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Audubon Living

Peeling Back the Label

It can be confusing trying to make sense of all the environmental claims plastered on food products lining grocery store aisles. Here's the truth behind the print.

By Gretel H. Schueller/Photograph by Stephen Wilkes

Take a look at your local grocer's shelves and you'll see food with stickers and packages promoting an array of feel-good, environment-friendly assertions—from "cage free," "hormone free," and "all natural" to "organic," "fair trade," and even "biodynamic." There's a reason for all this green branding. Since 2003 U.S. organic food sales have more than doubled, to roughly \$25 billion. The booming demand for organic foods is making greenwashing more tempting—and more lucrative—than ever before.



One study found that about a third of all new food products launched in 2008 claimed to be "natural."

With all the different green food labels—there are about 100, depending on how you choose to define them—figuring out which ones are the most meaningful can be challenging. The mother of all eco-labels is, of course, "organic." Experts say this one showed the way in terms of defining methods of growing food that are gentler on the landscape. But even "organic" has its limitations. For one, organic certification addresses neither working conditions for farm workers nor impacts on wildlife habitat or water quality.

What this all means is these days, you really have to do your homework to know what you're buying, even if the packaging does have an eco-friendly seal. The following lists aim to peel back the labels.

In the Bag

Third-party certification is the best means for determining whether a label's claim really makes the grade. These designations are authentic, with a few caveats.

USDA Organic

Since 2002, when it first went into effect, the U.S. Department of Agriculture's organic seal has been considered the gold standard of organic food. To earn the label, foods must be produced without the use of synthetic pesticides, herbicides, fertilizers, sludge, irradiation, or genetically modified seeds, according to the agency. Cows must have access to pasture a

minimum of 120 days per year. There are four tiers of “organic” defined by USDA guidelines. When 100 percent of the ingredients and methods are organic, the product can be classified “100% organic” and stamped with the USDA Organic seal. When 95 percent or more of the ingredients fit the bill, the item can be labeled “organic” and also display the seal. When at least 70 percent of a product’s ingredients are organic, the package can state “Made with organic,” but it cannot include the official seal. Products with less than 70 percent organic ingredients cannot carry the seal, although specific ingredients that are organically produced can be identified as such on the ingredients list.

Fair Trade

This certification looks at economic, social, and environmental criteria: Farmers are paid living wages and have safe working conditions; child labor is prohibited. Fair trade premiums are invested in community development, such as training and organic certification. Most pesticides and all GMOs are banned in favor of environmentally sustainable farming methods that protect both habitat and farmers’ health. In the United States, coffee, tea, herbs, cocoa, chocolate, fresh fruit, sugar, rice, and vanilla are available with this ethically minded label.

Rainforest Alliance

The independent certification overseen by the Rainforest Alliance aims to reduce water pollution and soil erosion, protect human health, conserve wildlife habitat, improve livelihoods, and reduce waste. More than 84,500 farms totaling upwards of 1.8 million acres—in South America, Southeast Asia, and Africa—have been Rainforest Alliance certified. The chief products include coffee, cocoa, tea, nuts, and fruits.

Food Alliance

This logo requires that certifiers assess a farm or ranch in five areas: soil and water conservation; safe and fair working conditions for employees; limiting pesticide use and toxicity with integrated pest management; animal welfare; and habitat conservation. Industry experts give it high marks. To date, the Food Alliance has certified almost 350 food producers—a number that’s grown nearly 79 percent in the past four years.

Demeter Biodynamic

This label also takes a whole-farm approach. Not only does it require that foods be produced organically, without the use of synthetic pesticides, fertilizers, or animal by-products, it also prohibits the use of genetic engineering. It requires that 10 percent of a farm’s total land be set aside for fostering biodiversity and the humane treatment of animals. The focus is on whole-farm certification instead of on a particular crop or area.

Salmon-Safe

Some certifiers promote a very specific form of sustainability not covered under the organic umbrella—like protecting salmon streams in the Pacific Northwest from farm runoff, chemicals, and erosion. Salmon-Safe certification is often combined with USDA Organic to provide a “beyond organic” certification. To date it has accredited more than 60,000 farm acres and more than 200 vineyards.

Bird Friendly

Developed by the Smithsonian Migratory Bird Center, this label independently certifies organic shade-grown coffee. Tree canopy height, plant diversity, shade coverage, and streamside plant borders must all meet specific criteria. Certified shade-grown coffee farms provide important sanctuaries for migrating birds. About 1,400 producers grow Bird Friendly coffee, and sales reached more than \$3.5 million in 2008.

Certified Humane Raised and Handled

This certification, endorsed by several animal welfare and food safety organizations, including the ASPCA, focuses on humane animal care standards, from birth through slaughter. For example, animals must be free to move about and “engage in natural behavior.” This means that chickens have room to flap their wings and pigs have space to move around and root. Cages, crates, and tie stalls are prohibited, as is the use of growth hormones and prophylactic antibiotics.

FishWise

This is a three-tier system of color-coded labels that ranks seafood products according to sustainability criteria. The catch location and the fishing method—longline or hook and line—are also included on the label. FishWise is a program from Sustainable Fishery Advocates, a nonprofit founded by two graduate students in the Ocean Sciences Department at the University of California-Santa Cruz. Its researchers work with the Monterey Bay Aquarium to evaluate sustainability. Each report is externally reviewed for scientific content and accuracy.

Non-GMO Project Verified

This seal, one of the newer labels on food shelves, grew out of the public’s frustration that GMO foods do not require labeling in the United States. Although many products have touted GMO-free claims, there’s been little consistency in the labeling and scant assurance that the products were actually tested. Foods carrying the label are made following “best practices of GMO avoidance,” claims the nonprofit. (Because of cross-contamination and pollen drift, it can’t guarantee that a food is entirely free of genetically modified ingredients.) Certification also requires genetic testing, to guarantee that a product contains no more than 0.9 percent biotech material. That’s the same threshold as in Europe, where GMO labeling is required.

Healthy Grown Potatoes

Many farmers are primed to make a change from conventional farming but aren’t ready to go completely organic, much less sustainable on multiple fronts. For starters, they might try to avoid the most harmful pesticides. That’s what a group of Wisconsin potato growers decided after an especially toxic chemical called aldicarb started showing up in the local groundwater. Working with the University of Wisconsin, the World Wildlife Fund, the International Crane Foundation, and Defenders of Wildlife, the growers adopted a plan to reduce their overall use of chemicals and eliminate the highly toxic ones. To earn this certification, farmers must also restore some of their farmland to prairie or wetlands.

Buyer Beware

Many of the environmental claims are riddled with loopholes. Compounding the confusion is that numerous foods are regulated by different or multiple government agencies. The following labels are weaker.

Raised Without Antibiotics

Some industry experts are adamant that “no antibiotics” should mean no antibiotics—at any stage of production. Often, however, that’s not the case. One of the most egregious examples: Tyson Foods, the second-largest U.S. chicken producer, was labeling some of its chickens as “raised without antibiotics” despite the fact that it was injecting the eggs with an antibiotic and was using a non-human one in its chicken feed on a daily basis. After several lawsuits, Tyson removed all antibiotic claims. While “no antibiotics administered” and “raised without antibiotics” are considered acceptable by the USDA, there is no

verification system in place—which is what enables a company like Tyson to make false claims. The specific “antibiotic free” claim is considered “unapprovable” by the USDA.

Natural

This is one of the most egregiously abused labels, since it doesn't have to mean anything. And yet in the supermarket it's lumped together with “organic.” The USDA has defined the term only for use on fresh meat. In this case, it is defined as nothing added to the cut of meat itself. As a result, you could have a cloned animal eating genetically modified food and being fed antibiotics every day and the product could still be labeled “natural.”

Free Range

When it comes to “free range” and “free roaming,” all a poultry farmer needs to show is “that the poultry has been allowed access to the outside,” according to the USDA's Food Safety and Inspection Service. The animals may get only short periods outside in a cramped area—the USDA considers five minutes adequate to approve use of the claim. There are no restrictions regarding what the birds can be fed. Such inhumane practices as forced molting through starvation—to increase egg production and therefore profitability—are permitted. There is no third-party auditing. Lax regulation has allowed producers to keep animals closely confined, even if they're not actually in cages. When it comes to beef and egg-laying hens, the term is completely unregulated.

United Egg Producers Certified

The logo, devised by the United Egg Producers, falsely implies that the chickens have been treated humanely. Think cramped cages, starvation-based molting, dehydrated birds, denial of veterinary care. (This designation replaces the even more misleading Animal Care Certified, which was banned by the Federal Trade Commission.)

American Humane Certified

A program of the American Humane Association, this label permits both caged and cage-free options for egg-laying hens. A caged hen can be crammed into a space the size of a sheet of paper. Forced molting through starvation is prohibited, but beak cutting is allowed.

Dolphin Safe

This is a partially certified claim because the National Marine Fisheries Service verifies only tuna caught from a specific region—the eastern tropical Pacific Ocean—and not all tuna. Tuna from this designated area might bear a label that includes the additional phrase “US Department of Commerce.” Tuna caught outside this area and labeled “dolphin safe” has not been independently substantiated. To muddy the waters further, the dolphin-safe label is not licensed by any single organization, so there are no universal standards in place and most companies have developed their own logos.

Grass Fed

This label would seem to mean that a cow ate only grass. But all cows eat grass when they're young. So unscrupulous greenwashers can legally put this label on beef from conventional feedlot cattle. Make sure the label states “100% grass fed.” Better yet—because verification of the claim is voluntary—also look for the USDA Process Verified shield. The agency has defined the label to mean that the cows were fed a lifetime diet of 100 percent grass and forage, with no grains or grain products. The cows must also have access to pasture during most of the growing season.

Nutri Clean Residue Free Certification

This label, from the Scientist Certification System's Nutri Clean program, implies that a food

bearing this label is free from pesticide residue, which isn't entirely accurate. The program merely tests products for pesticide residue and sets limits for the detection of specific ones. It also doesn't necessarily mean that there were no pesticides used to grow the food. In fact, some of the residue limits are the same as the ones set by the EPA; in those cases, the label really offers nothing more than its conventional counterpart.

Marine Stewardship Council

The MSC got its start as a noble initiative between the World Wildlife Fund and Unilever, a major fish retailer. In 1999 both organizations withdrew from all management, and the MSC became an independent nonprofit (see "Gone Fish," page 94). Today it's considered one of the biggest seafood certifiers. However, it's come under attack by some top-tier ocean scientists who say it's a scheme that fails to protect the environment and needs radical reform. In particular, they question the sustainable certification of several fisheries that in recent years have experienced massive declines. These include the important U.S. trawl fishery for pollock in the eastern Bering Sea. The MSC has also pronounced many destructive bottom-trawl fisheries sustainable. Furthermore, critics say, the MSC's methodology and assessment can lead to an "inconsistent application of standards." Last, the program receives financial contributions from corporations that sell MSC-labeled seafood, posing a conflict of interest.

False Advertising

Some common labels are so vague as to be utter nonsense. The terms below have no standards or definitions, or any method of verification. Thus the producer can use them in any way it sees fit, with no repercussions.

Cruelty free

Cage free

Environmentally friendly

Nature's friend

No chemicals

Vegetarian fed

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