

The Comments of Food Animal Concerns Trust

to the United States Department of Agriculture and the Agricultural Market Service
on the development of a “Naturally Raised” Livestock and Meat Marketing Claim

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Introduction

FACT is a non-profit organization that promotes better methods of raising livestock and poultry by improving the welfare of farm animals, increasing the safety of meat, milk and eggs, broadening economic opportunities for family farmers and reducing environmental pollution. We are pleased to have this opportunity to provide comment during this listening session on the development of a “Naturally Raised” label claim for meat and poultry products.

FACT supports the USDA’s effort to devise a meaningful definition for the use of the term “Naturally Raised.” However, FACT supports an all encompassing “Natural” label that covers animal production practices from “conception to consumption” and is consistent across all agencies of the USDA, including AMS and FSIS. In other words, any USDA-approved term that includes the word “natural” should be a comprehensive definition, applicable not only to the raising of livestock from birth to harvest, but also to slaughter methods and final processing of the end product, not livestock production only or processing only. We believe this will eliminate the potential for confusion in the minds of consumers, who may see an FSIS certified “natural” or “all natural” product on the shelf and mistakenly believe the animal from which that meat or poultry product was produced was also “naturally raised.”

That said, FACT applauds AMS for attempting to develop standards for natural animal production through its “Naturally Raised” label. At a minimum, FACT asks for the following to be included as part of the standards for a “Naturally Raised” label:

1. Antibiotic use should be prohibited for products labeled as “Naturally Raised.” Livestock shall not be administered antibiotics or antimicrobials from birth to harvest. FACT believes sick animals should be treated therapeutically with the necessary life-saving medications. However, these treated animals should not be labeled as “Naturally Raised.”
2. Hormones and other growth promoters, including ractopamine, should not be allowed from the last third of gestation of the birth mother all the way through harvest of the offspring.
3. Animal feed should be free of all animal by-products.
4. Animal welfare guidelines that allow the animal to express its natural behaviors (such as nest building for sows or dust-bathing and pecking for chickens) must be included. This will preclude the use of intensive confinement production practices, including gestation and farrowing crates, veal crates, tethers, slatted floors over manure pits, and battery cages for poultry.

FACT’s position is supported by consumer research. On June 1, 2004, a nationwide survey released by Whole Foods Market found that 79.3 percent of those surveyed believed that a clear definition of “natural meat” should include a standard that eliminates the use of antibiotics in feed. 78.5 percent of those surveyed also believed animals should be raised without growth hormones. 68.4 percent of those surveyed thought natural meat should not include animal by-products. Almost half of those surveyed (48.4%) believed the standards should include humane treatment of animals, and humane slaughtering methods (43.5%).¹

Statements from the USDA also support FACT’s position. As stated at the prior listening session in Washington, DC, the USDA’s intention is to “develop a standard that reflects public and producer interest.”² Undersecretary Knight also stated that the “starting point [for this claim] is consumer research, which indicates that those who want to buy natural products particularly want the option to choose meat and poultry raised without the use of antibiotics and hormones. Some customers also want to be assured the meat and poultry production as “Naturally Raised” comes from animals that have not been fed animal byproducts, have been raised on a vegetarian diet, have lived under free-range conditions, and have been raised with careful regard to animal welfare concerns.”³

Clearly, the development of a “Naturally Raised” claim will require careful consideration of all the issues, as stated above. Because livestock production is so multi-dimensional, and because the “Naturally Raised” label has the potential to be very inclusive in scope, FACT asks that the USDA allow ample time to carefully consider all the issues relevant to how a consumer or sustainable producer would realistically perceive natural animal production. FACT supports collaboration and dialogue between the USDA, industry groups, producers, farmers, sustainable agriculture groups, consumer advocacy groups,

¹ “Majority of Americans are Unaware most Meat and Poultry is Raised with Antibiotics, Growth Hormones.” Whole Foods Market IP, L.P., Austin, TX. June 1, 2004.

² Naturally Raised Livestock and Meat Marketing Claim Listening Session transcripts, December 11, 2006.

³ Ibid.

animal welfare groups, and animal scientists as part of this process in order to develop a standard that will be meaningful to consumers and producers alike.

Concerns & Considerations

Previously Proposed Production Claims

There has been a great deal of work put into the development of four production claims proposed earlier by the AMS Livestock and Seed department. These include the grass-fed, raised without antibiotics, raised without hormones, and free range claims, of which only the grass-fed claim has been published for final comment. FACT believes the USDA should consider the work and valuable input previously put forward in these claims, using the discussions and input on these claims as a basis for some of the standards considered for the “Naturally Raised” label.

FACT also encourages the USDA to move forward on these four claims. Once promulgated, these will be important standards from which to base production claims for the “Naturally Raised” Label. In addition, producers who do not wish to use an all-encompassing “Naturally Raised” label should still have the option to use these four production claims as a way to differentiate their products in the marketplace.

Production Issues – Feed

- Will animal by-products be allowed in feed?
- Will manure be allowed in feed as a protein source or filler? Manure is often a component in cattle feed, and FACT believes most consumers would not consider this “natural.”
- Will pesticides, sewage sludge, or chemicals be allowed in the production of grain used in animal feed?
- Will antibiotics be allowed in feed or water?
- Will ruminants be allowed to eat grain, or will they be grass-fed?
- If ruminants are allowed to eat grain, will there be any restrictions in terms of how much grain is allowed or when grain will be permitted, such as during finishing only?
- Will GMO-feeds or forages be permitted?
- Will milk replacers be allowed for veal calves or should calves be raised on pasture alongside their mothers?

Production Issues – Housing

- Will outdoor access be required for “Naturally Raised” animals?
- If so, will there be guidelines for different geographic regions that take into consideration different weather patterns?
- Will there be a time requirement for outdoor access, i.e. a minimum # of days per year, or hours per day?
- How will outdoor access be defined? For example, will the potential for outdoor access be enough (such as a door at the end of the barn) or will the animals actually be required to spend time outside. This is an important consideration, as

- current organic regulations do not provide a clearly defined standard for “outdoor access.” Because there is no clear definition of “outdoor access” in the standards, this requirement has been widely abused by producers and does not provide the type of outdoor access consumers expect in an organically raised animal.
- Will certain types of housing be prohibited that may be viewed by consumers as detrimental to animal welfare, such as gestation crates for sows, or crates and tethers for veal calves?
 - What type of indoor housing will be allowed for animals that must come inside due to inclement weather or to protect them from predation? Will deep-bedded systems be allowed for hogs?
 - What types of flooring will be allowed or prohibited, such as slatted floors in sow stalls and certain types of veal calf housing?
 - If outdoor access is not required, will natural daylight be required?
 - How will lighting systems be addressed, as the amount and length of daylight (simulated or natural) can have a direct effect on production?

Production Issues – Animal Welfare

- What will be the basis for developing animal welfare standards? For example, will the AMS review and take into consideration currently established humane certification labels, such as the Certified Humane through Humane Farm Animal Care, or the AWI (Animal Welfare Institute) Certified Humane label? FACT believes these programs would be a good starting point for establishing clearly defined, easy-to-audit and consumer-transparent welfare guidelines.
- Housing, which is discussed above, is an important component of animal welfare. Therefore, different housing systems for each species must be considered. For example, will veal calves be raised in groups or individually? Will gestation crates be prohibited in pork production?
- Will minimum stocking densities and space requirements be established?
- Will the standard take into consideration the Five Freedoms, established by the Farm Animal Welfare Council, which require freedom of movement that allows the animals to perform natural behaviors, such as dust-bathing for hens, grazing for ruminants, nest building for sows, and suckling for calves?
- How will weaning be dealt with and will minimum weaning times be established for each species?
- Will certain physical alterations be banned or allowed under the “Naturally Raised” label, such as tail docking for dairy cows and pigs, teeth clipping for piglets, beak trimming and toe clipping for broilers, dehorning for cattle, or castration?
- If some or all of these procedures are allowed, will anesthesia be required?
- Will there be requirements for the humane slaughter of food animals?
- Will transport issues be addressed?

Production Issues – Antibiotics

- Will antibiotics be allowed for treatment of sick animals? If so, will animals treated with antibiotics be allowed to be labeled as “Naturally Raised?”

- Will routine use of all antibiotics, for disease prevention or growth promotion, be prohibited?
- Will routine use of medically important antibiotics, for disease prevention or growth promotion, be prohibited?
- Will antibiotics be allowed for breeding stock of animal intended for natural production (this would apply to other claims)?
- What will the policy be on coccidiostats, ionophores and arsenicals?

Production Issues – Hormones

- Will any hormones be permitted, including the use of hormones to sync estrus in a group of animals for the purpose of controlling reproduction?
- If hormones are not permitted, how will the USDA deal with the issue of pork and poultry, where hormones are currently prohibited by law? Will pork and poultry products that carry the “Naturally Raised” label also need to include the same disclaimer for hormone use that is currently being used when a pork or poultry producer uses the claim “No Hormones Added” on their products. Currently, any pork or poultry producer who uses the “No Hormones Added” claim on their label must also include the disclaimer “federal regulations prohibit the use of hormones.”
- Will beta-agonists, such as ractopamine and other similar growth-promoting substances that are not technically hormones, be banned?

Production Issues – Other Drugs & Chemicals

- Will vaccination requirements be established by species?
- If antibiotics are not permitted, what other drugs or alternative therapies will be allowed under this proposed label?
- What types of chemicals will be allowed to control pests, bugs, and rodents?

Production Issues – Environmental

- What types of manure storage systems will be permitted?
- Will liquefied manure systems be allowed?
- How will the potential for air and water pollution be addressed?

Production Issues – Food Safety

- Will there be any requirements for pathogen testing? For example, under PEQAP, egg farmers must routinely test their flocks and henhouses for Salmonella enteritidis?
- Will chicken manure be allowed as a feed source for cattle?

Other Labeling Issues

- How will a “Naturally Raised” label impact consumer perception of other non-animal products currently being labeled as natural, such as breakfast cereals?
- How will an animal product that is not raised naturally, but is processed naturally, be labeled? Will a consumer confuse the terms? For example, if a consumer sees a product labeled as “all natural” that has only been naturally processed, isn’t it reasonable to assume they make think it was also “Naturally Raised?”

- Will changes need to be made to the FSIS term “natural” to eliminate possible confusion, such as changing the term “natural” to “minimally processed,” or “processed without chemicals and artificial ingredients.”
- How will a “Naturally Raised” label affect consumer perception of the USDA’s organic label?

Verification/certification

- How will the production practices included in this label be verified?
- Will there be an independent group of advisors to monitor the integrity of the label?

Conclusion

As one can see, the list of considerations is long. FACT hopes the AMS and the USDA will devote ample time and resources to the development of a “Naturally Raised” standard that is clear and concise, transparent and meaningful to consumers and producers. FACT also supports meaningful collaboration between the USDA, industry groups, producers, farmers, sustainable agriculture groups, consumer advocacy groups, animal welfare groups, and animal scientists as part of this process in order to develop a standard that will be meaningful to all interested parties.

FACT requests any information regarding the timeline for the rule-making process on the “Naturally Raised” claim.

Thank you.