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FS# 2100CD

Organic Labeling

So...what does it mean???

The term “Organic” has been around since 1940 to describe a set of farming practices. More recently, the USDA officially defined the term and created the National Organic Program and seal to show that a product has been certified organic rather than conventionally produced. This label can be used on fruits, vegetables, dairy, meat, processed foods, beverages and even health and beauty items. Here’s the USDA definition:

Organic is a labeling term that indicates that the food or other agricultural product has been produced through approved methods. These methods integrate cultural, biological, and mechanical practices that foster cycling of resources, promote ecological balance, and conserve biodiversity. Synthetic fertilizers, sewage sludge, irradiation, and genetic engineering may not be used. (USDA National Marketing Service Website Last Modified Date: 10/27/2011)



How are Organic products overseen?

The National Organic Program regulates all organic crops, livestock, and agricultural products certified to the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) organic standards. Organic certification agencies inspect and verify that organic farmers, ranchers, distributors, processors, and traders comply with the USDA organic regulations. The USDA conducts audits and regulates more than 90 organic certification agencies operating around the world. They also conduct investigations and enforce compliance with USDA organic standards. Approximately 30,000 on-site inspections are performed every year by certifying agents to monitor compliance.

How do I know if my food is Organic?

Look at the label. If you see the USDA organic seal, the product is certified organic and has 95 percent or more organic content. That means if the label claims it is made with specified organic ingredients, for multi-ingredient products such as bread or soup, those specific ingredients have been certified organic.



Here's a Tip! One trick you might want to use at the grocery store to check if the product is organic is to look at the Price Look-Up (PLU) code on the sticker of large bins of loose apples, oranges, etc. All organic produce starts with the number 9, while conventionally grown produce starts with the number 4. Sometimes produce goes wandering from one bin to the next...this will help you to verify your produce is organic.

There is, however, an alternative label you might notice called *Certified Naturally Grown*. This label indicates food was produced using the same standards as those for organics, but not on a farm actually certified by the National Organic Program of the USDA. Some farmers feel the cost and process they need to go through to participate in the USDA's organic program is not a workable solution for them. This is an alternative, non-governmental certification system where other farmers act as inspectors in a program administered by a non-profit organization called Certified Naturally Grown. "Natural" is a term thrown around quite a bit these days, so read your labels carefully!



Other labels to examine

There are a number of additional labels you might find on a visit to your local grocery store, which are voluntary labels for livestock products, such as meat and eggs. Most of the definitions below are provided in their entirety courtesy of the USDA Agricultural Marketing Service web page at <http://www.ams.usda.gov>. We'll discuss those NOT defined by the USDA as well.



Free Range/Free Roaming...this label indicates that the flock was provided shelter in a building, room, or area with unlimited access to food, fresh water, and continuous access to the outdoors during their production cycle. The outdoor area may or may not be fenced and/or covered with netting-like material. This label is regulated by the USDA.

Free-Range Poultry...as defined, these birds spend part of their time outside...whether that's 10 minutes per month or 10 hours per day...and don't live in cages. However, the USDA doesn't have a legal definition regarding free-range chicken eggs.

Cage Free...this label indicates that the flock was able to freely roam a building, room, or enclosed area with unlimited access to food and fresh water during their production cycle.



Natural...as required by USDA means that meat, poultry, and egg products labeled as “Natural” must be minimally processed and contain no artificial ingredients. However, this label does not include any standards regarding farm practices, and only applies to processing of meat and egg products. There are no standards or regulations for the labeling of natural food products if they do not contain meat or eggs.

Grass-fed...these animals receive a majority of their nutrients from grass throughout their life, while. As regulated by the USDA, the grass-fed label does not limit the use of antibiotics, hormones, or pesticides. Meat products may also be labeled as “Grass-fed Organic.” Organic animals’ pasture diet may be supplemented with grain.

Pasture-raised...due to the number of variables involved in pasture-raised agricultural systems, the USDA has not developed a labeling policy for pasture-raised products.

Humane...multiple labeling programs make claims that animals were treated humanely during the production cycle, but the verification of these claims varies widely. These labeling programs are not regulated. However, there are two programs (which are completely separate, and run by different non-profit organizations) that do certify animals are raised in a humane manner, they are designated as *Animal Welfare Approved* / *American Humane Certified* products.



Another label often seen at coffee shops and groceries is *Fair Trade Certified*. This label is most often found on coffee, but it’s used on other products, such as bananas, tea, cocoa and sugar. Fair trade isn’t certified by the USDA, but it is enforced worldwide by the Fair Trade Labeling Organizations International (FLO) and in the U.S. by Fair Trade USA. *Fair trade* products must be produced in accordance with the following

guidelines:

- Workers must receive decent wages, housing, health and safety guidelines
- Workers have the right to join trade unions, and child or forced labor is completely prohibited.
- Crops must also be grown, produced and processed in a manner that supports social, economic and environmental development.

(FarmAid website 2012)

Products with *GE-Free* / *Non-GMO* labels claim to be free of genetically engineered (GE or GMO) ingredients. The Non-GMO Project is a non-



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profit organization that verifies products are produced according to their standards for avoiding GMO ingredients.

All of the labels previously mentioned are certified or tested by third parties, but there are many more labels and claims producers and processors make that are not independently verified or enforced.

So what's the final message? What are the best products...Organic...Certified Naturally grown...Fair Trade? The answer is really all...or none...it's up to the consumer to decide.

How does one make the best decision? Asking questions of your local farmer or local grocer is key to making an informed decision, and an informed decision is ALWAYS the better decision.

For more information regarding USDA regulations visit:
<http://fnic.nal.usda.gov/food-labeling/organic-foods>