



Voluntary Certifications

Eco-labels, Animal Welfare, and Fair Trade Certifications

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Farmers today have a wide range of voluntary labels and third-party certifications they can use to communicate their ecological farm practices or social justice practices to customers: Grass-fed to Salmon-Safe, Certified Vegan, Non-GMO, Fair Trade, and beyond. In some cases, products with a particular certification can garner a price premium. And, in other cases, the certification primarily serves to differentiate your product from the competition. With each label or certification, the costs to the farmer vary considerably. Meanwhile, only the most diligent customers can keep track of what practices the labels mean. At its worst, the mosaic of food labels and certifications available today have the potential to confuse and discourage customers from caring. At its best, a visual label stands out to consumers and helps them find your product. Consequently, farmers using certain labels or certifications should be prepared to educate their customers and champion their significance. To help you navigate the various labeling and certification options for your farm, this fact sheet includes an overview of:

- Eco-labels;
- Animal welfare labels;
- Fair trade and social justice labels; and
- Additional resources.

Eco-labels

Eco-labels serve to communicate a variety of farm values and agricultural practices that protect soil, water, biodiversity, wildlife, and other natural resources while reducing the use of petroleum-based energy and inputs, pollution, and other toxins. The eco-labels also resonate with customers who believe certain practices are more beneficial to farm worker health and protection, as well as their own health and that of their families.

Organic Certification is probably the most common “eco-label,” especially for whole fruits, vegetables, dairy, and processed foods. Please see the “Organic Certification” fact sheet for more information on how to become certified organic. For customer perceptions of “organic” and current trends please see the Hartman Group’s research: www.hartman-group.com.

The Consumer Union maintains a comprehensive on-line resource to almost 60 eco-label certifiers at www.greenerchoices.org/eco-labels. The site has a variety of “buying guides” that may be helpful in educating your customers; it also allows you to search for information by specific label, product, or certifier.

What makes a good eco-label?

According to the Consumers Union, there are five key criteria used to evaluate label claims and certifying groups:

- 1. Meaningful, verifiable standards:** Eco-labels should have a set of environmentally meaningful standards. These standards should be verifiable by the certifying group or another independent inspection organization.
- 2. Consistency:** An eco-label used on one product should have the same meaning if used on other products. Standards should be verifiable in a consistent manner for different products.
- 3. Transparency:** The organization behind an eco-label should make information about organizational structure, funding, board of directors, and certification standards available to the public.
- 4. Independence:** Certifying organizations and their employees should not have any ties to, and should not receive any funding, sales fees, or contributions, from logo users except fees for certification. Employees of companies whose products are certified, or who are applying for certification, should not be affiliated in any way with the certifier.
- 5. Public comment:** All certification standards should be developed with input from multiple stakeholders including consumers, industry, environmentalists and social representatives in a way that doesn't compromise the independence of the certifier. Industry representatives, for example, can play an important advisory role without having direct financial, decision making or management ties to the certifier.

Source: Excerpted from www.greenerchoices.org/eco-labels/eco-good.cfm (12/2013)

Animal Welfare Labels

A related category of labeling concerns the welfare of farm animals, specifically how they were raised and processed. The USDA has a list of animal audits and welfare programs on its Web site found through the Animal Welfare Certification Program at awic.nal.usda.gov (click on “Farm Animals”, and then “Animal Welfare Audits and Certification Programs”). Some organizations focus on farm animals and some advocate for all domestic and wildlife as well. Usually there is a protocol or list of standard practices that the agency has deemed to constitute “humane” practices. There may be an on-site audit and fee involved. If approved, you can use the certifier’s logo on your product.

Grassfed meat and dairy products have established protocols and the American Grassfed Association does offer a certification (www.americangrassfed.org). However, “grass finished” has no legal or regulated definition. Meat producers may also be interested in becoming certified as following certain religious dietary laws, the most common being Kosher or Halal. Each certifier has its own requirements.

Fair Trade and Social Justice Labels

Fair Trade and other labels that highlight social justice values distinguish themselves by including or focusing on the rights of people, especially farm workers or in the case of coffee and cacao, marginalized farmers. Fair Trade labeling is overseen by the Fairtrade Labeling Organization (FLO) in

Europe. Each country has members of FLO that work with producers, processors and retailers. The member in the United States is Oakland-based TransFair USA (www.transfairusa.org). A wide range of products can be Fair Trade Certified. However, fair trade certifications for domestically produced fruits and vegetables are far less common. For more information, please contact the Seattle-based Domestic Fair Trade Association at www.thedfta.org.

There are emerging efforts to introduce labels that reflect social justice values, often linking to Living Wage Campaigns and interfaith communities. Harvest for Humanity (www.harvestforhumanity.com) is one effort in Florida. In the past, United Farm Workers (UFW) produced certified fair trade apples from Washington State.

Additional Resources

Note: Listing of these sites does not constitute an endorsement by WSDA of any views expressed by the organizations. It is intended as a resource for information on specific labels only.

Animal Welfare Approved

www.animalwelfareapproved.org

Animal Welfare Approved is a voluntary food label for meat and dairy products that come from farm animals raised to certain animal welfare and environmental standards. The program is accredited to ISO guideline 65. Their website has extensive information for farmers. They also offer a grant program for farmers wishing to change their practices to meet the organization's standards.

Certified Naturally Grown

www.naturallygrown.org

Certified Naturally Grown is similar to organic certification in not allowing synthetic fertilizers, pesticides, herbicides, fungicides or GMO seeds. However, it is an independent program not affiliated with the USDA National Organic Program. Certified Naturally Grown's goal is to "minimize paperwork and certification fees and employ a peer-inspection process built on local networks."

Food Alliance

www.foodalliance.org

Based in Portland, Oregon, the Food Alliance is an independent third party that endorses farm and ranch producers as well as food handlers (food processing businesses) to meet program standards in eight areas such as worker conditions, humane treatment of animals, and environmental standards. Handlers and farmers become certified through an audit and inspection process which allows the products of these farms and facilities to carry a seal of approval.

Salmon Safe

www.salmonsafe.org and www.stewardshippartners.org

The Salmon-Safe Farm Management Certification Program is a third party certification. In Washington State, the program is coordinated by Stewardship Partners. Salmon-Safe works to restore water quality and salmon habitat in Pacific Northwest salmon watersheds. They do this by evaluating farm operations using conservation practices benefiting native salmon. Operations endorsed by its independent certifiers are promoted with the Salmon-Safe label.

Verified Non-GMO

www.nongmoproject.org

Based in Bellingham, the “Verified Non-GMO” project was initiated by the retail industry to provide independent, third party verification and labeling for non-GMO (genetically modified organism) food and products. They also do consumer education and advocacy.

Consumer Research

www.hartman-group.com

The Bellevue-based Hartman Group offers a variety of cutting-edge research reports, white papers, a blog, and a free newsletter on “sustainable” food trends.

“Farmers Market Glossary of Terms”

www.farmersmarketcoalition.org

The Farmers Market Coalition has a glossary of farming terms, food processing, animal husbandry and farmers market terms written to help customers, market managers and farmers speak the same language.

“Food Labeling for Dummies: A Definitive Guide to Common Food Terms and Claims”

www.animalwelfareapproved.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/Food-Labeling-for-Dummies-screen-v9-041013.pdf

To help make sense of the bewildering range of food claims and terms, Animal Welfare Approved has produced a comprehensive guide that provides definitions for the most commonly used claims and terms for the production, marketing and labeling of meat, dairy, eggs and other farmed products.

“Glossary of Meat Production Methods”

www.sustainabletable.org/spread/handouts/Glossary_of_Meat_Production.pdf

The Sustainable Table has produced a consumer-friendly “Glossary of Meat Production Methods” that highlights the different claims, labels and certifications being used in marketing meat.

Recommended Fact Sheets

9. Direct Marketing in Washington State

16. Organic Certification

For further information, to provide comments, or suggest a resource to add to this fact sheet, please email smallfarms@agr.wa.gov or call (360) 902-2888.