



Demystifying Food Labels for Meat and Poultry Products Part I: Overview

Authored by Clinton Neill, Former Assistant Professor, Agricultural and Applied Economics, Virginia Tech; Tao Qi, Graduate Student, Agricultural and Applied Economics, Virginia Tech; and John Bovay, Associate Professor and Kohl Junior Faculty Fellow, Agricultural and Applied Economics, Virginia Tech

Overview of Food Product Labels

Food labels often represent credence attributes, which are qualities consumers cannot verify even after consumption. This creates an information asymmetry between producers and consumers (Kuchler et al., 2017). For producers and consumers alike, the meaning behind the labels found on meat products may be confusing.

The purpose of this publication is to help improve buyer understanding of retail meat and poultry product labels using text and infographics. Each infographic contains basic facts and straightforward definitions of common words and phrases included on labels used on meat and poultry products found in grocery stores nationwide.

What is the Purpose of Adding Labels to Retail Food Products?

Voluntary labels on food products usually signify important attributes (that is, features, characteristics, or qualities) of those products, which provide information that sellers want to consumers to know. By labeling products with descriptions of certain attributes, sellers may be able to charge a higher price for those products relative to closely related (substitute) products. By using voluntary labels of product attributes, supermarkets and food manufactures can communicate information that changes consumer demand for certain food items.

Some federal and state regulatory agencies require specific labels for certain products, such as the Nutrition Facts Panel. In some states, some products are also required to include date labels such as “best

if used by” or “sell by”. (The only federal requirements for date labels are for infant formula; and packing date labels for poultry and eggs, which are less helpful to consumers than “use by” or “sell by” labels. See Broad Leib et al. (2013) for additional discussion.)

In addition to required labels, the federal government (primarily the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Food Safety and Inspection Service—USDA FSIS—and the Food and Drug Administration—FDA) enforce the definitions of a small number of voluntary labels. In particular, USDA FSIS must review many label claims on meat and poultry products. USDA FSIS (2024) provides a full guideline on whether FSIS must approve specific meat and poultry labels. Other voluntary labels are not subject to regulations and can be used at the manufacturer’s or retailer’s discretion. Whether you are a producer or consumer, it is important to understand how each label is defined. Better understanding of these labels will improve the flow of information from producer to consumer.

Common Labels for Retail Meat and Poultry Products

Natural Label

The “natural” label on meat and poultry products indicates that the product contains no artificial ingredients or added colors and is only minimally processed (USDA FSIS, “Meat and Poultry Labeling Terms”). (See Figure 1 for a summary.) “Natural” labels also must include explanatory statements such as “no artificial ingredients; minimally processed”.

However, the term “natural” is not well defined for most other food products. Several economic studies

using consumer surveys and experimental studies suggest that consumer confusion about the natural claims is widespread (Kuchler et al., 2017).

natural

adj. /'nɑCH(ə)rəl/

1. No artificial ingredients
2. No added color
3. Minimally processed

MINIMALLY PROCESSED

The product was processed in a manner that does not fundamentally alter the product.

ALL RAW & SINGLE INGREDIENT MEAT AND POULTRY QUALIFY AS NATURAL

guess what?

but There are no limitations on these products containing flavoring solutions as long as the solutions are minimally processed and not artificial.

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Figure 1: Natural Label

Kosher Label

Kosher labels indicate that these meat and poultry products are prepared under rabbinical supervision (USDA FSIS, “Meat and Poultry Labeling Terms”). (See Figure 2 for a summary.) However, meat products sourced from swine cannot be considered for kosher labelling, as pork products are prohibited by Jewish laws. There are many different kosher certification agencies.

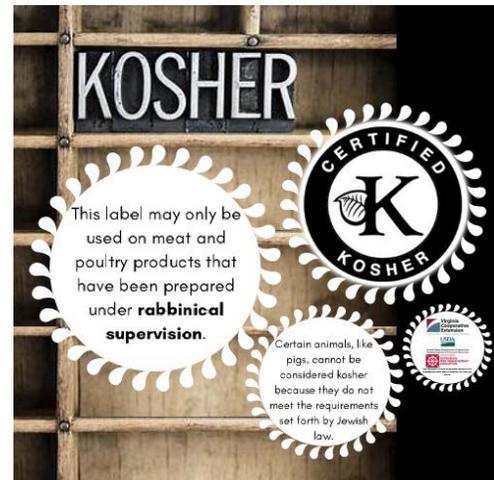


Figure 2: Kosher Label

Lean and Extra Lean Labels

When a label includes the words “lean” or “extra lean,” this refers to the amount of total fat, saturated fat, and cholesterol the meat or poultry contains. Lean meat less than 10 grams of total fat and 4.5 grams of saturated fat per 100 grams of product. Extra lean meat has less than 5 grams of total fat and 2 grams of saturated fat per 100 grams of product. Both lean and extra lean meat must have less than 95 milligrams of cholesterol per 100 grams of product (9 CFR § 317.362). (See Figure 3 for a summary.)

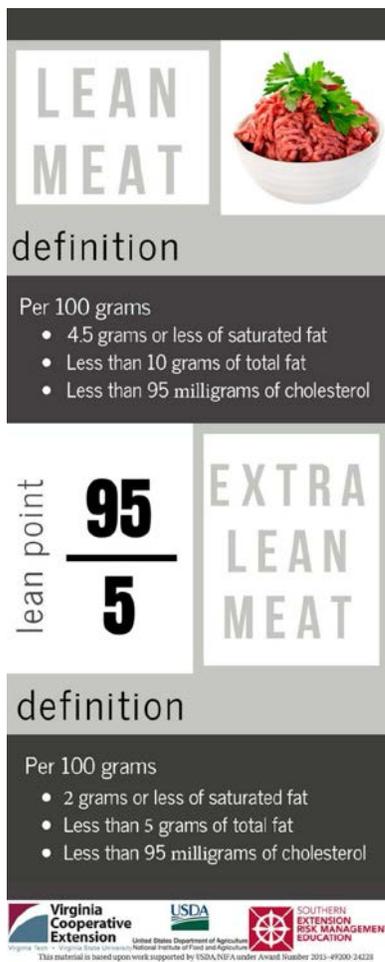


Figure 3: Lean Meat and Extra Lean Meat Labels

Mechanically Separated Label

This label appears on pork and poultry that is made into a paste-like or batter-like product (USDA FSIS, “Meat and Poultry Labeling Terms”). This is done through a process of forcing bones with edible meat on them through a sieve. To a producer, using more of the harvested animal to produce additional products may result in higher revenues per animal.

Mechanically separated beef is prohibited for use as human food (USDA FSIS, “Meat and Poultry Labeling Terms”). (See Figure 4 for a summary.)

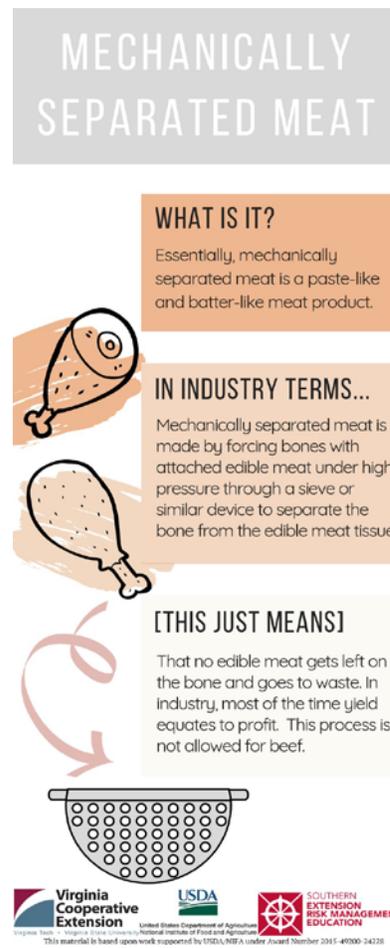


Figure 4: Mechanically Separated Label

No Hormones Labels

Beef and lamb producers may use hormones to increase the amount or quality of meat per animal, and federal law also allows certain hormones to be used in raising swine (USDA FSIS, 2021). Beef and lamb products may qualify for the “no hormones administered” label if sufficient documentation is provided to the USDA FSIS to verify the animals were raised without the administration of hormones (USDA FSIS, “Meat and Poultry Labeling Terms”). (See Figure 5 for a summary.)

In the United States, poultry and goat producers are not allowed to administer hormones to these animals, and therefore all poultry and goat meat qualifies for the “no hormones added” label (USDA FSIS, “Goat from Farm to Table”; USDA FSIS, 2013). However, the following statement must accompany the “no hormones added” label in these products: “Federal regulations prohibit the use of hormones.”



Figure 5: No Hormones Labels

Antibiotics-Related Labels

To use the “raised without antibiotics”, “raised antibiotic free”, or “no added antibiotics” labels, producers must document to USDA FSIS that the animals were raised without antibiotics (USDA FSIS, “Meat and Poultry Labeling Terms”; USDA FSIS, 2019; USDA FSIS, 2021). Products might also be labeled with the claims “no sub-therapeutic antibiotics” or “no antibiotics used for growth promotion” if these claims are accurate (USDA FSIS, 2021). (See Figure 6 for a summary.)



Figure 6: Antibiotics-Related Labels

Organic Label

The USDA organic standards describe agricultural practices “that foster resource cycling, promote ecological balance, maintain and improve soil and water quality, minimize the use of synthetic materials, and conserve biodiversity” (USDA AMS, “Labeling Organic Products”). Products may only be labeled as organic if production practices have been

verified by a USDA-accredited certifying agent (USDA AMS, “About the Organic Standards”). Some of the requirements for meat and poultry products to be labeled as organic include the following. Animals must be provided with access to the outdoors year-round (except for temporary confinement if there are documented health or environmental risks) and be raised under animal health and welfare standards. Organic meat must be from animals that consumed only 100% organic feed (though producers may also supplement their feed with vitamins and minerals). Ruminants (cattle, sheep, and goats) must be pastured for the entire grazing season and for at least 120 days and must receive at least 30 percent of their feed from pasture. Organically raised animals are not allowed to receive either hormones or antibiotics (USDA AMS, “Organic Livestock Requirements”). (See Figure 7 for a summary.)



Figure 7: Organic Label

Non-GMO Label

GMO stands for “genetically modified organism”. Genetic modification is also referred to as “genetic engineering” or “bioengineering”. USDA FSIS requires that any meat or poultry product bearing claims such as “Non-GMO”, “No GMOs”, “No GE ingredients”, “Not bioengineered” be certified by a third party specializing in evaluating these types of claims; or, that the meat or poultry product also bear an organic label (USDA FSIS, 2019). (See Figure 8.)

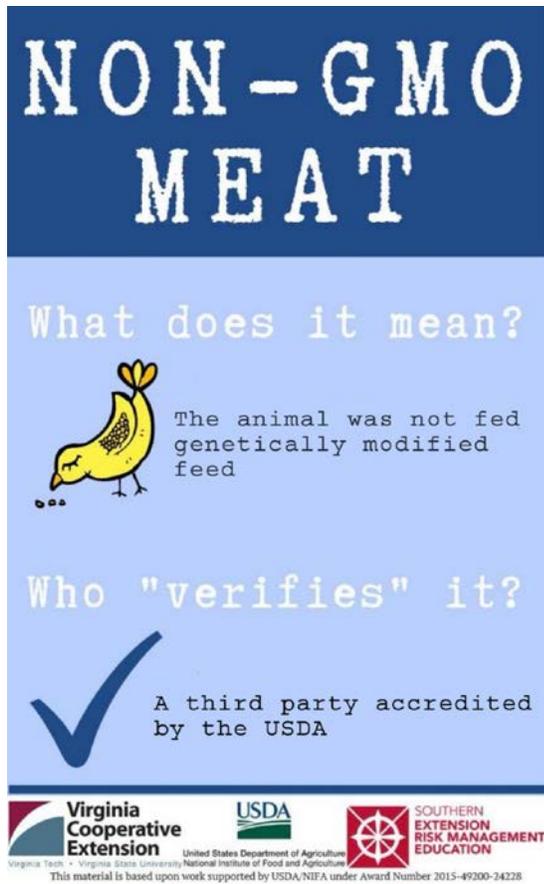


Figure 8: Non-GMO Meat Label

Country of Origin Label

Country of Origin Labeling, often known as COOL, is a labeling law that requires retailers to notify consumers about the source (country of production) of certain meat, poultry, fish, and shellfish products, in addition to some other food products (See Figure 9). While all imported food must meet USDA and FDA food safety standards, some farmers lobbied for the regulation, hoping that consumers would pay more for domestically raised meat (Kuchler et al., 2017). Currently, COOL labeling is only required

for lamb, chicken, goat, venison, fish, and shellfish (among animal-sourced protein products).

In addition to mandatory COOL, meat, poultry, and egg products can be voluntarily labeled as “Product of USA” or “Made in the USA” if they are derived from animals born, raised, slaughtered, and processed in the United States (USDA, 2024).



Figure 9: Country of Origin Label

For More Information

See our publication, “Demystifying Food Labels for Meat and Poultry Products Part II: Labels for Specific Products” (VCE publication AAEC-171NP) for more information about labels that apply only to certain types of meat and poultry products.

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