



What Do All These Label Claims Really Mean?

LABEL CLAIMS TYPICALLY REFER TO ONE OF THREE CHARACTERISTICS:

1

HOW
the animal was
RAISED



2

WHAT
the animal
ATE



3

HOW
the animal was
PROCESSED



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These definitions seek to provide a basic understanding of some common claims in the marketplace and are in no way intended to address the vast scope of definitions used by various producers and third-party certifiers. Some of these claims have regulated and published definitions and others do not. A farmer/business submits the claim and supportive documentation justifying the claim to their federal and/or state labeling division depending on what jurisdiction they fall under. The labeling division reviews the paperwork submitted for accuracy before allowing the claim to be used on a package or point of sale materials. If a consumer wants to know that a third-party agency has visited the farm/business AND verified the claim against a published set of protocols, they must look for claims on packaging that are certified by a third-party such as American Grassfed Approved, Animal Welfare Approved, Certified Humane, Global Animal Partnership and others.

Claim: No Added Hormones

Unverified claim:

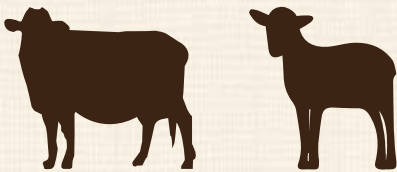
This claim may be used without third-party verification.

Characteristics of:

How the animal was **RAISED**

The Claim Applies to:

Cattle (for beef and dairy production), and lamb



Meaning:

Animals have been raised without added hormones (also referred to as growth promotants). FDA-approved growth promotants are frequently used in conventional farming practices to speed growth and increase weight gain for more efficient production.

Addressing Customer Questions:

- Pigs and chickens are not legally allowed to receive hormones according to federal law so if the claim is used on pork and poultry packaging it must also contain the disclaimer "Federal regulations prohibit the use of hormones in poultry and pork".
- Customers may also confuse hormones that are naturally occurring in the animal with growth promotants. All animals have naturally occurring hormones just like humans, hence the claim "No Added Hormones" is used to describe growth promotants in place of "Hormone Free", which could mislead the customer.
- Customers interested in purchasing products raised without added hormones, should seek third-party verified claims when possible. Although the USDA approves the use of claims like No Added Hormones based on documentation provided, no independent third-party verification system is in place for this claim (meaning no company or organization is required to audit the farm to ensure proper use of the claim).

Claim: Raised Without Antibiotics

Unverified claim:

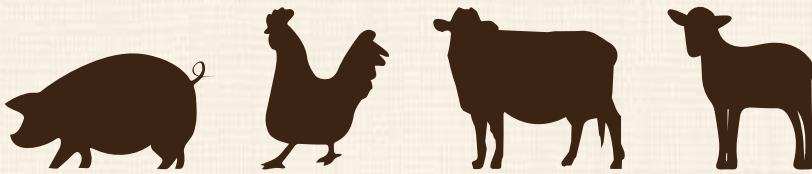
This claim may be used without third-party verification.

Characteristics of:

How the animal was **RAISED**

The Claim Applies to:

Pigs, chickens, cattle, and lamb



Meaning:

Animals have not received routine-use or even one-time use of antibiotics throughout the animal's life.

Addressing Customer Questions:

- Customers may ask "What if the animal is sick? Does the farmer treat the animal if the meat has this claim?" If an animal is sick and needs antibiotics to treat an illness the farmer can treat the animal, document that antibiotics were used, and pull that animal from the "raised without antibiotics" supply chain to ensure it is not sold with the "raised without antibiotics" label.
- Routine-use of FDA-approved antibiotics are frequently used to prevent illness and promote growth and are commonly administered in larger commercial production systems. When antibiotics are given (routine or one time), federal regulation requires a withdrawal period before slaughter so that the drugs can fully leave their system before entering the food supply chain as meat products.
- Customers interested in purchasing products raised without antibiotics, should seek third-party verified claims when possible. Although the USDA approves the use of claims like Raised Without Antibiotics based on documentation provided, no independent third-party verification system is in place for this claim (meaning no company or organization is required to audit the farm to ensure proper use of the claim).

Claim: All Natural

Unverified claim:

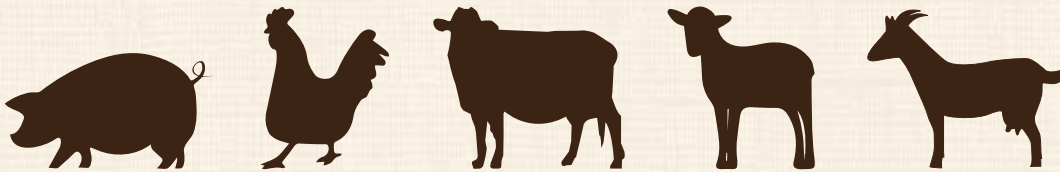
While USDA Food Safety and Inspection Service defines this label claim, it is not verified by a third-party and may be misleading to consumers.

Characteristics of:

How the animal was **PROCESSED**, and refers to a finished meat and/or poultry product.

The Claim Applies to:

Any meat product (pork, chicken, beef, lamb, goat, other).



Meaning:

Also seen as "Natural", the USDA FSIS definition refers to processing and/or additives for the meat or poultry product itself and does not describe how the animal was raised. Meats with the "Natural" label contain "no artificial ingredients or added color and/or the meat is minimally processed which means the meat is processed in a manner that does not fundamentally alter the product".

Addressing Customer Questions:

- Natural is a widely misunderstood claim. Customers may ask if the natural claim describes the farming practice, and/or how the animal was raised, was the animal raised outdoors, were antibiotics or hormones used, etc. It is important to remind customers that this claim does not describe anything about how an animal was raised or other production practices. Rather, it simply refers to the processing/characteristics of the final meat and/or poultry product. In other words, all fresh meat such as a fresh pork chop, would be considered natural since the meat is in its original state, and has been minimally processed without artificial ingredients or additives.
- Although the USDA approves the use of claims like Natural based on documentation provided, no independent third-party verification system is in place for this claim (meaning no company or organization is required to audit the farm to ensure proper use of the claim).

Claim: Grass - Fed

Unverified claim:

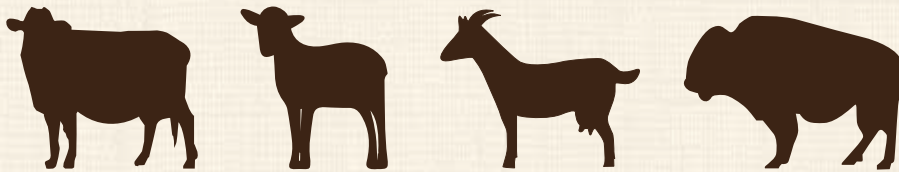
While USDA FSIS has published guidance regarding the use of this label claim, there is no standard definition. The claim may be used without third-party verification.

Characteristics of:

What the animal ATE

The Claim Applies to:

Cattle, lamb, goat, and bison (for meat and dairy production).



Meaning:

The claim implies that animal ate an exclusive 100% diet of grass and other forage in pre-grain state, such as legumes or broad leaf plants, after it was weaned from its mother's milk. The animal does not eat grain or grain by-products and has access to pasture their entire lives.

Addressing Customer Questions:

- Pigs and poultry cannot live off of a grass-based diet, so consumers should not find "grass-fed pork" or "grass-fed chicken" in the marketplace.
- Most cattle are raised on pasture for the first stage of their lives, including grain-finished, due to the economics of feedlot-finishing. The term grass-fed implies cattle were raised on pasture for their entire lives, however, it's important to remember that this claim only refers to what the animal ate and does not provide any information on how the animal was raised.
- Customers interested in purchasing grass-fed products, should seek third-party verified claims when possible. USDA approves the use of claims like grass-fed based on documentation provided (without a third-party audit) and there are also third-party verification companies (such as American Grassfed Association and A Greener World) which do audit the claim, meaning a company or organization visits the farm to ensure proper use of the claim against published protocols.

Claim: Grass-Finished

Unverified claim:

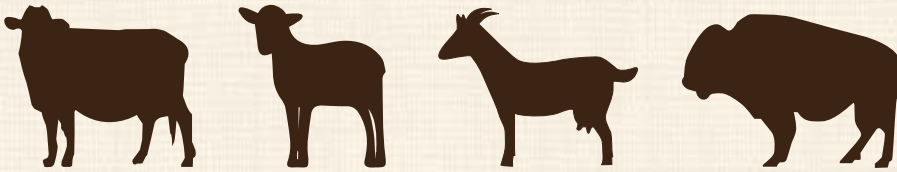
This claim may be used without third-party verification.

Characteristics of:

What the animal ATE

The Claim Applies to:

Cattle, lamb, goat, and bison (for meat and dairy production).



Meaning:

If the animal is fed any grain during its lifetime, the words "grass-finished" may be used as long as it is accompanied by the % of grass to grain. So, for example, a label may read, "grass-finished 80% grass, 20% grain." It is possible to have 100% grass-fed, 100% grass-finished label. So, a third-party verified grass-fed label would also be grass-finished, but grass-finished label does not necessarily mean it was a 100% grass-fed animal.

Addressing Customer Questions:

- Customers may not know that while the label claims the animal is finished on grass, it may have been fed grain at any other point in its life.
- Customers confuse animals fed grain with animals raised in commercial feedlot systems. Grain supplementation can be given to animals in pasture-based grazing systems or through formulated feedlot finishing systems. This claim only refers to what the animal ate and does not provide any information on how the animal was raised.
- Customers interested in purchasing grass-finished products, should be made aware that USDA reviews these claims based on documentation provided, and that definitions for "grass-finished" can vary widely. For 100% grass-fed and grass-finished products, consumers should seek out a reputable third-party certification that verifies the accuracy of these claims.

Claim: Grain-Finished

Unverified claim:

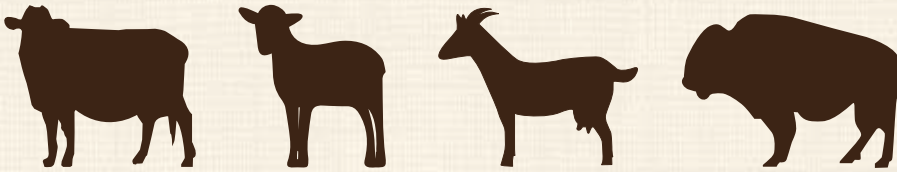
This claim may be used without third-party verification.

Characteristics of:

What the animal ATE

The Claim Applies to:

Cattle, lamb, goat, and bison (for meat and dairy production).



Meaning:

Most cattle are raised on pasture for the majority of their lives including grain-finished, due to the economics of feedlot finishing. However, the term grain-finished typically refers to cattle that transitioned to a feedlot to be finished, in most cases, entirely on a formulated grain feed the last quarter or so of their life (4-6 months, though details may vary).

Addressing Customer Questions:

- Customers interested in purchasing grain-finished products, should be made aware that there is not a published definition or third-party verification that ensures the accuracy of the claim. USDA reviews these claims based on documentation provided.

Claim: Pasture-Raised

Unverified claim:

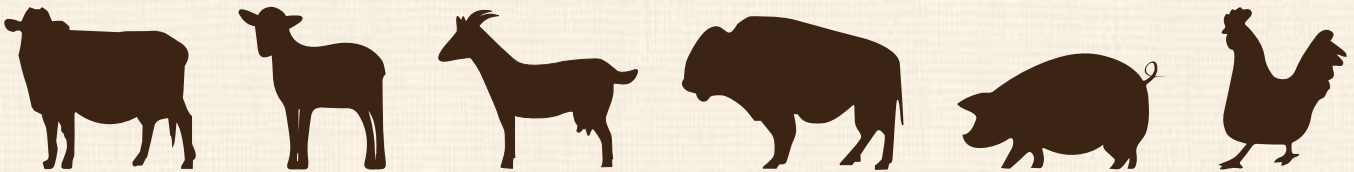
This claim may be used without third-party verification.

Characteristics of:

How the animal was RAISED, What the animal ATE

The Claim Applies to:

Cattle, lamb, goat, bison, pigs, chicken, other (for meat and dairy production).



Meaning:

Pasture-raised implies the animal was free to roam and have continuous and unconfined access to pasture throughout its entire life. In the case of cattle, the animal may eat a grass diet and/or receive a mixture of primarily grass/forage as well as lower amounts of corn or starch supplements to add marbling to the finished product. Exact amounts of starch to grass depend on the pasture-raised definition used.

Addressing Customer Questions:

- Pasture-raised ≠ Grass-fed. Pasture-raised animals may be fed some grain or may be fed strictly grass based diets, so they are not necessarily the same thing.
- Customers interested in purchasing pasture-raised products, should seek third-party verified claims when possible. USDA approves the use of claims like pasture-raised based on documentation provided (without a third-party audit) and there are also third-party verification companies (such as Animal Welfare Approved, certified by A Greener World) which do audit the claim, meaning a company or organization visits the farm to ensure proper use of the claim against published protocols.

Claim: *USDA Organic*

Third-Party Verified claim:

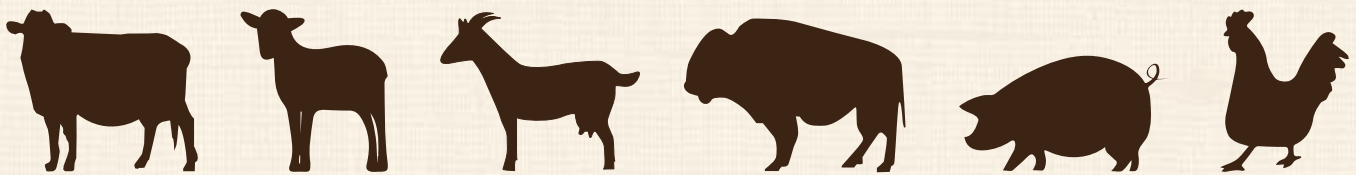
This label claim has had a third-party agency audit the farm/business AND verified the claim against a published set of protocols.

Characteristics of:

What the animal ATE, How it was RAISED, How the animal was PROCESSED

The Claim Applies to:

Animal production and final meat/poultry products for meat or dairy animals such as: cattle, lamb, goat, bison, pigs, chicken, other.



Meaning:

USDA Organic meat comes from a farm that is certified by a USDA approved third-party agency to meet the detailed USDA organic standards. These standards include methods that integrate cultural, biological, and mechanical practices that foster cycling of resources, promote ecological balance, and conserve biodiversity. Antibiotics, growth hormones, synthetic fertilizers, irradiation, and genetic engineering are examples of practices that may not be used in the USDA Organic label. Processors who slaughter and process the animal into meat, must also undergo USDA Organic certification in order to bear the claim.

Addressing Customer Questions:

- Organic ≠ Grass-fed. USDA Organic does not mean the animal is grass-fed. While a farm may be certified grass-fed and ALSO have USDA Organic certification, USDA Organic certification can be applied to animals fed on grain as well as animals fed on grass.
- Customers interested in purchasing USDA Organic products can be assured that all products sold as "organic" must meet the USDA National Organic Program production and handling standards published standards and undergo a third-party audit.

Claim: Non-GMO

Variable claim:

What does Non-GMO mean on meat product?

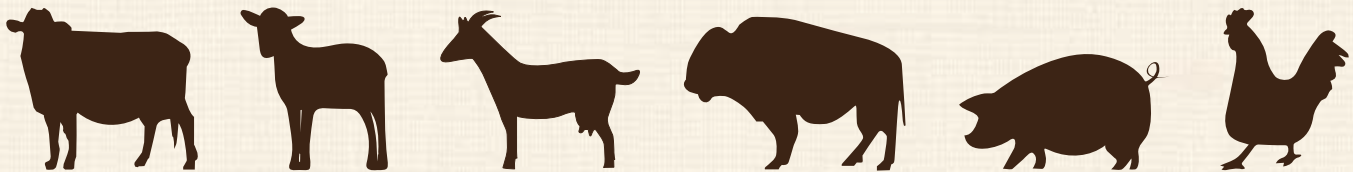
USDA FSIS has published guidance regarding this claim and requires third-party verification for its use.

Characteristics of:

What the animal ATE

The Claim Applies to:

Cattle, lamb, goat, bison, pigs, chicken, other (most commonly referenced in relation to livestock feed).



Meaning:

Genetically Modified Organisms (GMOs) are plants and animals whose genetic make-up has been altered to show traits that they would not normally have, like longer shelf-life, a different color, or resistance to certain chemicals or pests. Corn and soy are the largest GMO species in the United States, so many will see this claim in relation to livestock feed. A third-party certified non-GMO claim typically includes traceability, documentation, segregation, and purchasing to ensure a livestock feed free of non-GMO biological inputs.

Addressing Customer Questions:

- While there is a lot of GMO grain in livestock feed produced, there are currently no genetically modified animals on the market, i.e. the cows, chickens, pigs have not been genetically modified.
- Consumers have increasing concerns about the ecological and environmental impact of GM crops, including the prevalence of "super weeds" that adapted resistance to the herbicides sprayed on herbicide-resistant GMO crops. Public concerns also stem from patent rights over seeds owned by companies versus farmers and intellectual property laws surrounding ownership. Customers interested in purchasing Non-GMO products, should seek third-party verified claims, such as Certified Non-GMO by A Greener World or Non-GMO Project Verified.

Claim: Animal Welfare Approved (AWA)

Third-Party Verified claim:

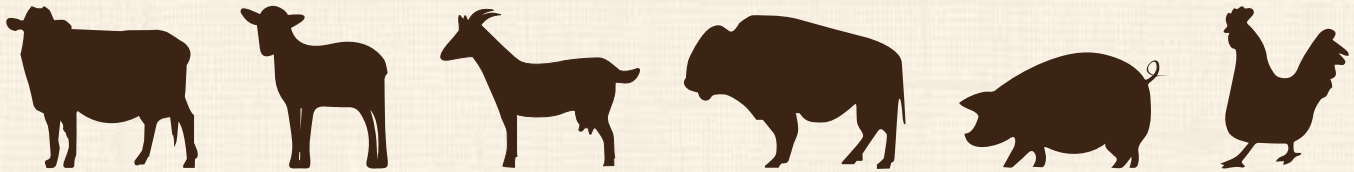
A third-party agency (A Greener World) has audited the farm/business AND verified the claim against a published set of protocols.

Characteristics of:

What the animal ATE, How it was RAISED, How the animal was PROCESSED

The Claim Applies to:

Cattle, lamb, goat, bison, pigs, chicken, other (for meat and dairy production).



Meaning:

Animal Welfare Approved is a voluntary program where farms receive a third-party audit to ensure that the farm is raising their animals in accordance with AWA standards. Among other requirements AWA requires animals to be raised on pasture or range and incorporates robust animal welfare and environmental standards. AWA also only works with family farmers, charges no fees to participating farmers (though costs are associated with mandatory audits). More details can be found at animalwelfareapproved.us/standards

Addressing Customer Questions:

- AWA ≠ Organic. While both claims include a multitude of standards, AWA's standards focus is on overseeing how the animal was raised and treated from farm through slaughter and does not require certified Organic feed, although non-GMO feed is recommended. A farm may be AWA approved and ALSO have USDA Organic certification. A farmer must process their animals in an AWA-recommended slaughter plant to bear the claim on their meat products.
- AWA also ensures no routine antibiotics, no added hormones, and no cloned animals are used.
- Customer interested in purchasing AWA products can be assured that all products sold as "AWA" must meet the AWA production and slaughter published standards and undergo a third-party audit.

Want to review more claims?

For a more complete list of voluntary claims as they pertain to animal production, visit : [A Greener World's Food Labels Exposed](#).

References:

- A Greener World. (2017, August). Food Labels Exposed: A Definitive Guide to Common Food Label Terms and Claims. Retrieved from <https://agreenerworld.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/AGW-Food-Labels-Exposed-2017-EMAIL-SCREEN-8-31-2017.pdf>
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