

# “Solutions for Your Life”



Manatee County Extension Service  
Community Services Department  
1303 17th St. W  
Palmetto, FL 34221  
(941) 722-4524



<http://manatee.ifas.ufl.edu>

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## Specialty Meat Labels: What do they mean?

Christa L. Kirby  
Extension Agent III, Livestock

It seems that many consumers are confused when they go to purchase their meat. In recent years consumers have multiplied their choices of meat products in the stores. Retailers and producers have become savvier in the marketing of meat products. In the past you didn't have a choice of how your meat was raised. Now you have multiple choices of meat. Some of the choices now available are “Organic”, “USDA Organic”, “Natural”, “Naturally Raised”, “Naturally Produced”, “Grass Fed” plus many more.

USDA Organic foods are produced under an Act of Congress named the “Organic Foods Production Act” (OFPA). This Act was passed by Congress in 1990. This states how organic foods are to be produced and processed for the consumer. The OFPA and National Organic Program serves as the governing body for standards of organic agricultural products. In order to use USDA Organic labeling the farm and/or production site must be certified by an USDA accredited or private organization.

Standards are in place for those individuals who are producing USDA Organic foods. Organic livestock and poultry production must follow the same standards as those in organic crop production. Some of the standards for organic crop production are:

- Raised without most conventional pesticides, petroleum based fertilizers, or use sewage or sludge based fertilizers.
- Prohibited substances can not be applied to the production grounds for three years prior to organic production.
- Genetic engineered or ionizing radiation (irradiated) products are not allowed to be used.
- Soil fertility must be managed through tillage, crop rotations, and cover crops or supplemented with crop and animal waste or other synthetic materials.

There are also standards in place for USDA Organic livestock and poultry production in addition to the organic crop production standards. The standards for USDA Organic livestock and poultry production are”.

- Animals must be raised under organic management from the last 1/3 of the gestation or 2 days of age for poultry.
- Animals must be fed 100% organic grain and/or forage diets
- NO growth implants, growth promotants, fed urea, or antibiotics are to be fed or given to the animal

- NO de-wormers are to be administered
- Animals may be vaccinated except for antibiotics
- Must have access to the outdoors and pastures for ruminant animals

Anyone who wishes to use the USDA Organic label and has a gross income of over \$5,000 annually must be certified.

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Anyone who wishes to use the USDA Organic label and has a gross income of over \$5,000 annually must be certified.

When discussing the labeling of the products there are also stipulations that must be followed. The label can only be used on products that are composed of 95% organic materials. The products must not come into contact with non-organic substances at any point of production or processing. Products can carry an “Organic” label on it without following these guidelines. It is not until a product carries an “USDA Organic” label that a producer faces a fine. If a producer should display the “USDA Organic” label without the standards being followed for the product being sold, they could face up to an \$11,000 fine.

Consumers may also see a labeling for “Natural” meat products. However, many times this labeling is confused with the labeling of “Naturally Raised” or “Naturally Produced” products. When a product carries the “Natural” label that product has not been more than minimally processed and does not contain any artificial flavors, coloring, preservatives or ingredients. The term minimal processing is defined as processing that doesn’t alter the raw product, but separates the product into component parts. Essentially, all meat would be termed “Natural” products under this definition.

“Naturally Raised” or “Naturally Produced” products have gone through USDA Food Safety Inspection Service (FSIS) for the labeling. At this point there are not any minimum standards in place for a product to carry such a label. Each product that is carrying this label has gone through the FSIS and is handled on a case by case basis for authorization of labeling. The authorization from the FSIS relies heavily on the producers’ testimonial, production records and affidavits stating that products were produced in such a manner. The Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS) and the USDA are currently determining what the minimum standards for what “Naturally Raised” or “Naturally Produced” should mean.

The final specialty label we will discuss in this article will be the “Grass Fed” label. The AMS and USDA have released the established standards to market “Grass Fed” meat on October 16, 2007. Until that point there were not any standards in place for “Grass Fed” marketed meat products. Consumers were relying on the honesty of the producer. These established standards

are now the process verification procedure for the AMS that must be used for marketing “Grass Fed” meat products. This standard states that any post weaning ruminant animal may only be fed forage from a pasture or harvested forage. The animals must have continuous access to pasture during the growing season. If for any reason the animal has received grain supplementation, the producer must submit explicit documentation as to the amount and the frequency that the grain supplements was fed.

Many producers have found a niche in marketing specialty labeled products. Consumers are willing to pay an increased amount for their food if it carries the specialty label. The USDA is not saying that foods carrying a specialty label are safer for you or your family. It is important for any consumer to understand that the US Meat Industry supplies the safest meat in the world, regardless of where or how it is produced. Consumers should be confident in the products they are purchasing for their families.

Sources:

Specialty Meat Marketing Claims: What’s the Difference? By Chad Carr, Larry Eubanks, and Ryan Dijkhuis; [edis.ifas.ufl.edu/AN191](http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/AN191)