

Be Careful When Reading Labels

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

As I work my way through the grocery store I am always reading labels. I'm looking at sizes and prices as well as descriptive words on the label. I could probably get through the grocery store in half the time if I quit reading the labels of products I'm not actually buying! But one thing that I've noticed is that many of the adjectives and descriptive words on the labels either have no value or they are flat out misleading!

Fifty years ago many Americans still had family members living on the farm. People ate out less and cooked more of their own food at home starting with raw products. On average the American public was far more food savvy. Today we have a vast majority of people that are two or more generations removed from a farm, over half of their meals are eaten out and what they do fix at home is often already partially processed. To these people, their food comes from the grocery store, not a farm.

Which leads me right back to the grocery stores. Take some time to wander the aisles of the grocery store when you aren't in a rush to buy something and get it home so the family can eat. Take a look at all the words that are on labels: all natural, organic, no antibiotics, no added hormones, grass fed, free range, the list can go on and on. Many of those words are regulated by the USDA and can only be used in certain ways.

Other phrases are so confusing and misleading they are actually prohibited from being placed on labels. One example of this is "hormone free". All naturally occurring meat contains hormones. Hormones are produced by the cells in all animals and plants. So the USDA does not allow the phrase "hormone free" because natural products aren't hormone free. But they can use the phrase "raised without added hormones" or "no added hormones" to indicate that the animals were raised without hormone supplements.

The list of regulated words on products, especially meat products, is quite lengthy. K-State Research and Extension has an excellent bulletin on this titled "Meat Product Labeling and Marketing: What Do All those Words Really Mean?" You can enter that title in your favorite internet search engine and find the bulletin on line or stop by the Extension Office (119 East 9th St.) and pick up a copy.

GMO's (and organic, but that's column for another day) are a hot topic and to be right honest most people really don't understand them. Some consumers, for personal or philosophical reasons want to avoid GMO products (non-GMO are not healthier by the way). Which means that companies can really take advantage of that on labels. I recently saw a can of green beans labeled "No GMOs". Most people walking down the food aisle would see that and immediately think that there are GMO green beans out there and they need to be careful what they buy. In reality, there are no GMO green beans labeled to be grown in the United States.

Sometimes there are additives, such as sweeteners, that may have come from GMO sources and those would be included as well. But in this case the contents were green beans, water, and sea salt. A can of generic green beans contained green beans, water, salt, and zinc chloride as a stabilizer. Although they aren't labeled as non GMO, there's nothing there that could contain GMO products. There is a web site, <http://www.isaaa.org/> that has a listing of what plants do have GMO versions and where they are labeled. Be an informed consumer! Buy wisely, but don't fall for misleading claims! Of course, if you have questions, please call us here at the Extension Office, 785-238-4161!