

Food Marketing Label Confusion

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

How many times have you been grocery shopping and started looking at the labels on the products and gotten confused? By confused I mean you didn't know what anything meant? Don't feel bad, you're in good company. There's nutrition information, there's ingredient listings, there's all sorts of this or that free, such and such production techniques, blah, blah, blah. If you want to know about nutritional information on the label, don't ask me. I have a great co-worker named Deb who can answer those questions very well for you. But what I want to talk about is what the parts of the label that say "all natural" or "non-GMO", etc mean. These are what I call marketing labels and may very well mean far less than you think.

First of all, there are multiple governmental agencies that have oversight of what's on the label. In fact, I can provide you with a 117 page document on labeling requirements just for meat, poultry and egg products! Hint - the words organic and GMO are not used anywhere in this document. There are many words that may be on labels that are nothing more than marketing ploys that have no regulatory impact. They are on the label to encourage the consumer to buy it.

Using "Organic" on a label does have requirements. In short, the product must have been produced and processed using organic standards and certified as such by whatever entity/agency in that state does that. USDA sets the standards but then relies on a variety of entities to enforce it from state to state. There is a great deal of confusion among the public about organic foods, especially plant products or the use of certain medications or growth promotants in livestock. There is a long list of products that are approved for plant and animal production that still allows the product to be labeled as organic, assuming that the required period of time has elapsed between treatment and harvesting. If you want to guarantee that nothing was applied to your fruits or vegetables, you'd better grow it yourself!

Natural is a word that drives me crazy when I see it used. When used in the ingredients label as in "natural spices", there is a specific requirement to be met. But when it's used on the label in a phrase like "naturally produced chicken", it has no regulatory meaning. In 2016 the FDA requested comments from the public on whether the term "natural" needed to be defined for production techniques. The comment period closed almost three years ago and nothing has come of it. The FDA has requirements of how the word natural will be used in regards to how the food is processed following production, but not how it was produced.

The phrase "non-GMO" is pretty straightforward but can be very misleading. Many consumers see non-GMO on the label and assume that there are GMO versions of that food product. In many cases there isn't a GMO alternative. There may also be an assumption that a product labeled non-GMO is healthier or more nutritious. That isn't the case either. The GMO issue is much larger than just this column so ask me if you have more questions.

The last one I want to mention is antibiotic free. I see it used so very often and people don't know what it means. No meat or dairy product can be marketed if it contains antibiotics. If an animal was sick and needed antibiotics to get well (just as would happen to you or me), then there is a mandatory waiting period until that animal can be slaughtered or the milk used to make sure it is out of the animal's body. Milk is tested before it ever leaves the dairy farm to make sure it is antibiotic free.

Food labels and nutrition are confusing enough as it is. Don't let marketing labels make it even more so! Ask questions and learn.