

## The Green Notebook

### Deciphering Those Eco-Labels

A product label isn't always what it is cracked up to be. Creative marketing and advertising often interfere with the real contents of products on your store shelves. Talk about confusing! Here is a quick guide to not being fooled by what you read (certainly not the last word on the subject, but a glance that might help):

- \* Natural—organic and natural food sections are often lumped together at the supermarket but don't mean the same thing. Look for additional explanation on products labeled as "natural." No guidelines for this label.
- \* Free Range—does not guarantee that meat, milk or eggs came from animals that went outdoors. More of a marketing scheme than anything else. The only USDA guideline is that the poultry raised for meat, not eggs, have some access to the outdoors (whether they use it or not). It doesn't specify stocking density (how many chickens stuffed into the space), frequency or duration of their outdoor privileges or the quality of the land accessible.
- \* Animal Care Certified or United Egg Producer Certified—does not mean egg-laying hens were uncaged or given more than a sheet of paper of space per bird.
- \* Hormone-Free, rBGH-Free, rBST-Free and No Hormones Added—these dairy labels mean the cows weren't injected with genetically-engineered hormones that increase milk production.
- \* Fair Trade Certified—coffee, chocolate, tea and some fruit produced by small farmers who earn a fair wage.
- \* Certified Humane and/or Free-Farmed—meat, dairy and eggs from animals that were raised in humane conditions.
- \* 100% Grass Fed—meat, dairy and eggs that come from animals that were fed grass with no grain. Fewer saturated fats, more omega-3s and other nutrient benefits are associated with this practice.
- \* Three Types of Organic Labels—100% organic, organic (greater than or equal to 95% organic), Made with Organic (greater than or equal to 70% organic)—For everything not labeled 100% organic, there are some synthetic (chemically-derived) ingredients allowed in organic packaged foods. Those products made without these or with a "no synthetic substances" claim are best if you can find them. For a complete list of the substances allowed, visit [www.ams.usda.gov/nop/NOP/standards/ListReg.html](http://www.ams.usda.gov/nop/NOP/standards/ListReg.html).

Certified organic animals must be allowed outdoor access with cows, sheep and goats given access to pasture to graze. Animals must have bedding materials and the use of hormones and antibiotics is prohibited. Compliance is verified through third-party auditing. Concerns linger, though, about lax enforcement, especially with large-scale producers.

Your best bet? Buy your eggs and meat from a local farmer who raises his or her animals the "old-fashioned" way—you know, in a barn with room to roam and graze. That is truly free-range.

For more information, visit [eco-labels.org](http://eco-labels.org), a free public service from Consumers Union.