



READING THE FINE PRINT: A CLOSER LOOK AT "HUMANE" LABELS

FARM SANCTUARY UPDATES GROUNDBREAKING FARM ANIMAL WELFARE STANDARDS REPORT

By Mat Thomas

Society's awareness of and concern for animals suffering on factory farms has increased dramatically during the nearly two-and-a-half decades since Farm Sanctuary has been a leading voice against agribusiness' exploitation of animals for food. Whereas few people even knew what a "vegan" was 20 years ago, today that word is firmly established in our lexicon, and legislation to protect farm animals from the worst agribusiness abuses is spreading from state to state. Yet the public's growing unease with factory farm cruelty has also given rise to another modern phenomenon of "humane" marketing and labeling schemes that typically promise something quite different from what they actually deliver when it comes to the welfare of animals exploited for meat, milk and eggs.

The sobering reality is that many of these "humane" labels (such as "cage free," "free roaming" and "naturally raised") are primarily marketing tools used to fool consumers into believing that animals raised for food are treated well when they are actually being mistreated in much the same ways as they are on factory farms. With more than a dozen programs making special animal welfare claims, and each program's standards based on dozens of different criteria, the devil is in the details, often leaving consumers unable to accurately determine what the labels really mean. Add to this the fact that some labeling schemes are regulated by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), while others were created by agribusiness and retail industry trade associations or third-party certifiers, and it is often difficult to untangle the truth from lies.

The Truth Behind the Labels

To help clear up this confusion, Farm Sanctuary produced a report in 2005 entitled "Farm Animal Welfare: An Assessment of Product Labeling Claims, Industry Quality Assurance Guidelines and Third-Party Certification Programs." This first-of-its-kind document remains the only comprehensive analysis of animal product labeling schemes ever published. Since these standards have continued to evolve over the last several years and additional programs have since been implemented, we recently released "The Truth Behind the Labels: Farm Animal Welfare Standards

and Labeling Practices," an updated and expanded version of this original report which will help today's consumers comprehend just what these labeling programs entail for farm animals.

Farm Sanctuary has produced two versions of the report to meet the needs of different audiences. One is an exhaustive exploration of the subject designed as a resource for academics in university agriculture departments and other specialists (such as government officials working for the USDA and the Food and Drug Administration) who are studying these issues for the purpose of policy formation. The other is a shorter summary booklet that activists can distribute to the public when tabling, and give to friends and family members who purchase so-called "humane" animal products because they don't want to support factory farms but are not yet ready to go vegan.

According to Farm Sanctuary Co-founder and President Gene Baur, the report sheds new light on what is otherwise a very murky subject. "Because so much of the language used by certification programs is inherently misleading, most people are unaware that even the most stringent standards fail to meet their expectations about how animals raised for food should be treated. We therefore developed our welfare standards report to provide the facts and increase the transparency of the labeling process."

While Baur believes that the updated report is an essential resource that

The Truth Behind the Labels: Farm Animal Welfare Standards and Labeling Practices



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will promote a more nuanced understanding of labeling and certification schemes, he is quick to point out that Farm Sanctuary does *not* endorse the consumption of animal products under any circumstances. “Farm Sanctuary is, always has been, and always will be a vegan organization dedicated to ending the agriculture industry’s exploitation of animals, and we are unequivocally opposed to the human consumption of animals. The report is meant to spark dialogue and discussion about what these labels actually mean by explaining and exposing the conditions they represent, and encourage people to ask themselves whether it is ever ethical to kill animals for food.”

Strategic Diversions: Avoiding Real Reform

The original impetus behind these labeling schemes, Baur asserts, was agribusiness’ recognition that standard factory farming practices are out of sync with the public’s growing concern for farm animal welfare, and that self-producing voluntary “welfare assurance” programs would be the best way for them to preempt the passage of basic humane laws. That is, by instituting their own standards, agribusiness would essentially be able to create the illusion that they had fixed the problem, while effectively enabling systemic animal cruelty to continue unabated. “In many of these labeling schemes, ‘free range’ chickens still spend their entire lives tightly packed together in sheds, cattle are still crowded into filthy feedlots, and pigs still have their tails cut off without anesthetic,” says Baur. “Few people would claim that treating animals in this way is ‘humane,’ but that’s exactly the notion these labeling programs were designed to promote.”

While some certification programs may provide measurable quality of life improvements for farm animals, it is crucial to realize that *all* farm animals – no matter how they are raised – are orphaned when they are torn from their mothers, often at or soon after birth, and in the end die in slaughterhouses when they are still so young that they have lived only a small fraction of their natural lifespans. Humans don’t need meat, dairy or eggs to survive: in fact, choosing a vegan diet is much healthier for us, and more environmentally sustainable. Farm Sanctuary hopes that people who read our welfare standards report will see that the only way to truly treat animals humanely is to refrain from eating them.



Animal Product Labeling Programs: An Overview

Farm Sanctuary’s animal welfare standards report examines claims made by government agencies, agribusiness industry assurance programs, retail trade associations, and third-party certification organizations, including:

Product Labeling and Marketing Claims – Many of the various product labels approved for use by the USDA – such as “cage free,” “free range,” “grass fed,” and “naturally raised” – are only vaguely defined, and often not verified by on-site audits.

Animal Industry Assurance Programs – These are voluntary guidelines developed internally by trade associations representing the animal agriculture industry, and are generally used to codify cruel but commonly-used practices as “humane.”

Retail Food Industry Auditing Programs – Under pressure from animal and consumer advocacy groups, some restaurant chains (McDonald’s and Burger King, for instance) have promoted modest animal welfare reforms by purchasing products from preferred suppliers, but claims are difficult to validate because these programs often lack transparency.

Third-Party Certification Programs – Some of these labeling schemes – such as the Certified Humane Program, American Humane Certified, Animal Welfare Approved, and Global Animal Partnership – were developed by or in conjunction with animal welfare organizations. However, the ones with the strictest standards also cover the smallest number of animals.

Download the full report “The Truth Behind the Labels: Farm Animal Welfare Standards and Labeling Practices” at farmsanctuary.org. “The Truth Behind the Labels” summary booklet and our “Truth Behind Humane Meat, Milk and Eggs” three panel brochure can be ordered through our online store.

