Marketing claims for beef confusing to consumers

By Jon Sarche
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

DENVER — Organic. Natural. No added hormones. No antibiotics. Grass-fed. Free-range.

An often-confusing array at a higher cost awaits consumers interested in alternatives to massoroduced beef after mad cow disease was found last month in a Washington dairy cow.

This spring, the government sexpected to approve new rules that should clear up some of the confusion.

Of all the current labels, the most stringently regulated is organic. Only organic beef meets strict standards verified by independent inspectors.

To be certified organic, beef must come from cattle fed grass or grain grown without pesticides. The meat must be traceable from the ranch to the dinner table.

Organic beef can be roughly double the price of ordinary mass-produced beef.

Other labels may boost the cost by 50 percent. And what does that label mean? For consumers, confusion reigns.

"The only way to know is to call the producer and ask what the label means," said Ruth Kava, nutrition director of the American Council on Science and Health.

Products labeled "natural" simply have to be minimally processed with no artificial ingredients.

Virtually any fresh-meat product can be labeled natural, said Roy Moore, one of those selling "natural" beef. Founder of Denver-based Maverick Ranch, he says his meat is also free of antibiotics and additional hormones.

Food labels making such claims must be approved by the U.S. Agriculture Department's Food Safety and Inspection Service, which works with the Agriculture Marketing Service to develop standards.

The goal is consistency among labels, so that one farmer's claim of natural, hormone-free beef, for example, means the same thing as that of another farmer, said Robert Post, director of the service's labeling and consumer protection staff.

Under current labeling rules, "natural" means no artificial ingredients or added color, and minimal processing like grinding, smoking or freezing.

Claims such as no hormones, no antibiotics, free-range or pasture-raised, or grass-fed or grain-fed may be approved if producers supply sufficient documentation to satisfy the FSIS. Inspections to verify claims can

be conducted if the agency believes something is wrong with a claim, Post said.

Proposed rules expected to be made final this spring are designed to set consistent definitions for claims including:

— No hormones: Animals never received supplemental hormones. A related claim of no hormones used during finishing would mean the animals did not receive supplemental hormones during the time before slaughter.

— No antibiotics: Animals never received antibiotics. A related claim of no subtherapeutic antibiotics means no feed laced with antibiotics; and no detectable antibiotic residue would mean any antibiotic treatment was ended long enough before slaughter to ensure the meat was free of traces of antibiotics.

— Free-range or pastureraised: Animals that have had continuous and unconfined access to pasture throughout their lives and have never been confined to a feedlot, where movement is limited.

— Grass-fed: Cattle that throughout their lives received 80 percent or more of their primary energy source from grass, green or range pasture or forage. Grain-fed would mean average grain consumption must equal at least half of the feed for 30 days for cows and 100 days for steers and heifers.

NEWS IN BRIEF

Small farmer's fight against Monsanto becomes crusade

OTTAWA (AP) — The case of a small-time armer from the remote Saskatchewan plains, now before Canada's highest court, may represent the best chance yet for foes of the global intech revolution to get the law on their side. Agribusiness giant Monsanto Co. sued the

Agribusiness giant Monsanto Co. sued the farmer, Percy Schmeiser, after its agents found biotech canola growing in his fields in 1997. It contends he replanted seeds from those plants with-

out paying a technology fee of about \$12 an acre. But Schmeiser says the Monsanto canola, originating from neighbors' fields, got onto his 1,400 acres without his involvement or knowledge. The 73-year-old farmer says the contamination of his crops destroyed a lifetime of work improving them, so it's hardly right that he would have to pay for Monsanto's seed.

Monsanto, which has a lien on Schmeiser's farm after two lower-court victories, says there was simply too much biotech canola in his fields for the accidental exposure explanation to be credible.



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