

FREE-RANGE AND ORGANIC MEAT, EGGS, AND MILK: CONNING CONSUMERS?

A Gallup poll revealed that most Americans support better treatment of animals who are factory-farmed for their meat, milk, and eggs.¹ As people become more aware of the horrors of factory farming, companies are responding by labeling their products “all-natural,” “free-range,” “free-roaming,” or “organic.” But these labels are misleading. Most “free-range” animals are still mutilated and forced to endure long trips to slaughterhouses without food or water. All of them have their lives violently cut short, and all are denied most of their natural behaviors.

“Free-Range”

Companies want consumers to believe that products labeled “free-range” or “free-roaming” are derived from animals who spent their short lives outdoors, enjoying sunshine, fresh air, and the company of other animals. Labels, other than “organic,” on egg cartons are not subject to any government regulations, and the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) does not regulate “free-range” or “free-roaming” claims for beef products.²

The USDA requires that “free-range” animals have access to outdoor areas, but there is no provision for how long they must spend or how much room they must have outside. The Associated Press reported that the USDA’s regulations don’t “require the birds to actually spend time outdoors, only to have access.”³ An eyewitness revealed that on a farm advertising that its hens were raised in a “natural setting,” the birds were actually crammed “wall to wall—6,800 chickens with one rooster for every hundred hens. They never set foot outside.”⁴

Because of genetic manipulation, even if an outdoor area is available, many chickens do not take advantage of the so-called “access.” One farm expert explains that chickens raised for meat in the United States are “not bred for mobility. They’re bred for hogging down food” and adds that because they simply cannot walk, the birds will rarely venture far from the feed trough.⁵ A study of about 800,000 chickens kept on free-range farms in the United Kingdom found that even though U.K. regulations require birds to have access to outdoor areas for at least eight hours a day, “the maximum number observed outside during daylight hours at any one time was less than 15% of the total flock.” The study explained that “chickens pre-

fer ranging areas with trees [and] they avoid bright sun” and that “[a] wide open field is simply not a preferred habitat.” The researchers explained that domesticated chickens, much like their wild ancestors, need a habitat that provides shelter from wind, sun, and predators and that free-range operations should provide birds with more protection if they want to entice them to roam outside the barns.⁶

U.S. regulations regarding free-range products apply only to chickens raised for meat, not to those raised for eggs.⁷ Regardless of what the egg cartons may say, most hens raised for their eggs are subjected to cramped, filthy conditions until their egg production begins to wane—at about 2 years of age—then they are slaughtered.⁸ More than 100 million “spent” hens are killed in slaughterhouses every year.⁹ When not being raised for eggs or meat, chickens can live for more than a decade.¹⁰ Male chicks, millions of whom are killed (usually in a high-speed grinder called a “macerator”) every year because they are worthless to the egg industry, are also victims.^{11,12}

“Organic”

Meat, poultry, eggs, and dairy products labeled “organic” have been regulated by the USDA since 2002 and must “come from animals [who] are given no antibiotics or growth hormones.”¹³ Farms, processors, and distributors must be inspected by the USDA before they are allowed to use the “organic” label. However, it is estimated that less than 1 percent of animals are raised by these standards.¹⁴ One cattle rancher complained, “Organic is a straightjacket (*sic*) with too many constraints.”¹⁵

The USDA cautions consumers that the “organic” label is not to be confused with or likened to the “natural” or any other label, and it “makes no claims that organically produced food is safer or more nutritious than conventionally produced food.”¹⁶

Like the “free-range” label, the “organic” label does not indicate that animals were treated any differently while being transported or slaughtered than animals raised on factory farms.

Other Labels Regulated by the USDA

- “Certified”: Meat that has been stamped with this label has been “evaluated” by the USDA “for class, grade, or other quality characteristics.”
- “Natural”: Use of this label is permitted if the product contains “no artificial ingredient or added color and is only minimally processed.”
- “No Hormones”: This label applies only to beef. Since hormones are not supposed to be given to pigs or chickens, pork and poultry products cannot legally be tagged with this label without the disclaimer “Federal regulations prohibit the use of hormones.”
- “No Antibiotics”: This label can be used on beef and poultry products, provided that the producer supplies “sufficient documentation ... that the animals were raised without antibiotics.”¹⁷

None of these labels address the welfare of animals during transport or slaughter.

Industry-Sponsored Programs

SWAP (Swine Welfare Assurance Program), a program that is offered to U.S. pork producers by the National Pork Board as “a tool to assist in measuring and tracking welfare on the farm,” is completely voluntary, is not enforced, and offers farmers no incentive to implement it.¹⁸

Many egg producers have signed up with The United Egg Producers scheme to use an “Animal Care Certified” label that is supposed to indicate that hens were treated humanely and inspected daily.¹⁹ Sadly, this program is not regulated or enforced either, and investigations have proved that companies using this label do not treat chickens any differently than factory farms do. Visit www.eggscam.com for photos from a Maryland farm that stamped its egg cartons with the “Animal Care Certified” label.

What You Can Do

So many different labels with inconsistent definitions and regulations make it difficult to determine which products are the most “humane.” Since none of the labels applies to transport or slaughter, and none prohibits bodily mutilations such as debeaking, tail-docking, ear-notching, or dehorning, the worst cruelties continue to be completely unregulated.

From the “free-range” hen who feels fresh air for the first time on her way to the slaughterhouse to the “humanely raised” dairy cow whose male calf is taken from her and sold to veal farmers, all animals who are raised for food suffer. The only truly humane option is to choose vegan alternatives to eggs, milk, and meat. Call 1-888-VEG-FOOD or visit GoVeg.com to order a free vegetarian starter kit

that contains information on faux meat, egg alternatives, and vegan cheese.

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