

PICKING THE GOOD EGG!

Behind the Label of “Ethical” Animal Product

Free-run, free-range, Born-3, grain-fed, non-medicated? The labels all sound good, but are the animals actually treated better on these farms? How would you know? Here is a guide to what’s behind the labels.

CODES OF PRACTICE

Canada’s Codes of Practice for the care and handling of farm animals lay out national expectations for animal welfare as agreed upon by consensus between the farmers, veterinarians, scientists, government agencies, SPCA’s and humane societies who are members of the National Farm Animal Care Council (NFACC).

The Codes have many functions. They outline minimum requirements and recommended best practices and serve as reference documents for animal cruelty laws. The Codes form the foundation of on-farm animal welfare assurance programs operated by some Canadian farming associations. Additionally, the Codes are widely used as an educational tool to inform farming professionals about sound management practices for the housing, care and transport of their animals.

While the Codes provide an important baseline for minimum standards of care, most animal welfare organizations believe additional requirements are necessary to truly ensure farm animals have good welfare. For this reason, the BC SPCA created animal welfare standards that go beyond conventional practice. Participating farms are assessed through the SPCA Certified program.

LABELLING

In Canada, there are several food certification programs with standards for animal welfare, the environment or workers’ rights. The federal Food and Drugs Act, section 5 (1) states that “No person shall label, package, treat, process, sell or advertise any food in a manner that is false, misleading or deceptive or is likely to create an erroneous impression regarding its character, value, quantity, composition, merit or safety.”

The Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA) reviews food packaging and related marketing materials under the federal acts and regulations. Labels that have not gone through this process could feature information that prevents consumers from making informed choices at the retail level.

The CFIA’s Consumer Protection/Fair Labelling Practices section acts as the labelling police, inspecting to ensure compliance and doing market intelligence on advertisements, websites, retailers, manufacturers and importers. Thousands of labels are screened each year and educational seminars are conducted to mitigate labelling confusion. If you see a label claim on a package that confuses you, contact CFIA through their website at www.inspection.gc.ca (under [Contact Us](#)) for further investigation.



GREEN LIGHT! - CHOOSE A CERTIFIED LABEL!

Some claims are misleading or viewed as giving a product a false uniqueness. Ignore marketing claims like “country fresh” (which really doesn’t mean much) and look for packaging labels reviewed by the CFIA.

SPCA Certified - The product comes from a farm following prescribed standards of animal welfare, assessed annually by a trained inspector and 3rd party, independent reviewers determine certification. The animal welfare standards are developed by an expert panel of animal welfare researchers, veterinarians, and farmers in consultation with the BC SPCA.

SPCA Certified animals are raised as either free-run or free-range (see definitions below). Each year the farmer is re-certified, and there are random inspections to ensure compliance.

The SPCA Certified red barn logo is CFIA reviewed and permitted for use on food packaging and marketing materials.

Certified Organic - Certified organic standards include animal welfare provisions within the organic management practices. Certified organic



YELLOW LIGHT - NEXT BEST BET TO CERTIFIED PRODUCTS

Although not backed up by certification, some product labelling suggests animals were raised in a more humane manner. Farms under the labels listed below can provide very high levels of welfare, if managed well. However, if they have not been certified, then they have not been inspected, which means you cannot be sure what standards are met.

Free-Run - This wording is found mostly on eggs. Hens that produce these eggs are raised free of cages and are kept entirely indoors. While these animals have no access to outdoor vegetation, they are protected from external threats, such as predators and parasites. All meat chickens in B.C. are raised free-run unless it is labelled as “free-range” or “organic,” so if you see chicken labelled “free-run,” without further qualifications it’s nothing special in B.C.

Free-Range - These animals are raised free of cages and other types of confinement housing and are provided with access to the outdoors, weather-permitting. The outdoor area provided does not guarantee suitable or useable pasture for grazing or foraging. This wording is found mostly on eggs, chicken, and sometimes pork.



RED LIGHT - BE CAREFUL! YOU MAY BE MISLED!

Don’t be fooled by any claims that vaguely imply animal welfare benefits! Inspection and certification to animal welfare standards has not occurred. In many cases, the claims below do not refer at all to how an animal was raised. See below for further details.

Animal-friendly - This claim does not guarantee that animals were raised humanely.

Country Fresh - These claims have no real meaning regarding the methods used to raise the animals or the actual quality of the products. The term “fresh,” for example, is not permitted on egg cartons.

Naturally Raised - Natural can only be used on meat, poultry and fish products if it can be proven that the animals were raised with minimal help from humans and were never given or administered substances including vaccinations, antibiotics, medications, veterinary drugs, hormones, direct fed microbials or formulated feeds. This is a very hard (almost impossible) claim to make under current Canadian labelling policies.

animals are provided access to the outdoors, either on pasture, range areas, runs or exercise areas. Some packages will describe this as free range (see definitions below). Organic certification in Canada is governed by provincial or federal regulations, depending on the final product's destination (i.e. intra-provincial, inter-provincial, export market). Imported organic products are governed by the federal Canadian Organic Regulations.

In B.C. supermarkets, the most common certified organic labels are:

- **COABC** (Certified Organic Associations of British Columbia);
- **QAI** (Quality Assurance International);
- **Pro-Cert** (Pro-Cert Organic Services);
- **Canada Organic Regime** (federally regulated; overseen by CFIA Canada Organic Office)



Pasture-Raised - Some farms are differentiating from free-range by providing animals with access to pasture and allowing them to graze or forage weather permitting, and presumably for most of their lives. A claim like this needs to be further explained to know exactly what it means. This wording is found on eggs, chicken, beef and pork.

ARE BROWN EGGS BETTER?

The colour of a chicken's egg is no indication of whether it is healthier or laid by a chicken that was raised more humanely. Egg colour is determined primarily by the breed of chicken that lays the egg - generally speaking, brown chickens lay brown eggs.

You can have SPCA Certified or organic white or brown eggs. Unless the eggs are "certified" most white eggs found in grocery stores come from hens raised in cages.

Vegetable-fed or grain-fed - Many farm animals are fed meat by-products as a protein or fat source. These label claims do not specify whether the animals' feed contains veterinary drugs or preservatives. Unless a statement like "no animal by-products" follows the term, there can be no assurance that the feed only contains grains. There is no indication of how the animals were raised outside of what they were fed.

Born-3 - These eggs come from conventionally raised, caged hens fed a unique diet that modifies the fat in the egg yolk.

Non-medicated - This claim could be made because the animals are not exposed to any pharmaceutical drugs (e.g. antibiotics) over the course of their lives, or because they were fed non-medicated feed. This claim gives no indication of how the animals were raised.

Raised without Antibiotics - Animals are not given antibiotics throughout the whole animal's life. Antibiotic free is inaccurate, and creates a false uniqueness, as all Canadian animals upon slaughter are to be free of antibiotic residue. This claim gives no indication of how the animals were raised.

Raised without the Use of Hormones - this claim can only apply to beef cattle as they are the only animal allowed to have hormonal implants in Canada. For those animals where hormones are not permitted a claim such as "like other chicken these were raised without the use of hormones" should be used otherwise it is a false labelling claim. Packages should say "Raised without the Use of Hormones" and not "Hormone Free" as hormones are found within all of us. This claim gives no indication of how the animals were raised.

Maple Leaf Prime Naturally - Animals on these farms are raised in the same manner as other conventional farms. The company markets its product based on food safety and feed requirements and not on any special treatment of the animals.