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Meat Labels Hope to Lure the Sensitive Carnivore

By ANDREW MARTIN

Correction Appended

Many cows, pigs and chickens will soon be living cushier lives.

But in the end, they will still be headed for the dinner plate.

[Whole Foods Market](#) is preparing to roll out a line of meat that will carry labels saying “animal compassionate,” indicating the animals were raised in a humane manner until they were slaughtered.

The grocery chain’s decision to use the new labels comes as a growing number of retailers are making similar animal-welfare claims on meat and egg packaging, including “free farmed,” “certified humane,” “cage free” and “free range.”

While the animal-welfare labels are proliferating, it remains unclear whether they appeal to anyone other than a niche market of animal lovers, particularly since the meat and eggs are as much as twice as expensive as products that do not carry the labels.

Mike Jones, a Louisburg, N.C., farmer who is raising “animal compassionate” pigs for Whole Foods, is convinced the new label will find buyers among “recyclers” and “foodies.”

“The recyclers will buy it because they love this kind of agriculture,” Mr. Jones said. “The foodies will buy it because they love the taste.”

The increase in animal-welfare labels has been driven in part by animal-rights organizations. The [Humane Society of the United States](#), for instance, has been working for nearly two years to end the practice of confining hens to cages. But, like organic and natural labels, the animal-welfare claims are also a way for food retailers to offer something their competitors do not.

“You are always trying to find a point of difference,” said Ted Taft, managing director of the Meridian Consulting Group. “You could argue that chicken is

chicken. But if you get a chicken that is free range, consumers will say, 'I like that.' ”

Mr. Taft added that buyers say “ ‘It makes me feel good.’ It’s something to give it an edge in a tie-breaker.”

The labeling trend has even been embraced by the restaurant industry, where a handful of high-end restaurants are now carrying “certified humane” meat. The [Chipotle Mexican Grill](#), meanwhile, trumpets its humanely raised pork in an ad campaign that appears on the company’s Web site and on billboards.

Steve Ells, the chain’s founder, chairman and chief executive, said his decision to use humanely raised pork, free of antibiotics and hormones, in his burritos was based in part on his distaste for industrial-style farming, but also on his belief that it tastes better. When the natural pork was added to the menu six years ago, sales of the pork burrito quickly doubled, though the price jumped by \$1.

“What is cool about this is we made our food taste better, and we did something good for the food system, for sustainability,” Mr. Ells said.

The market for cage-free eggs, which often cost 60 percent more, is growing rapidly, though neither the federal government nor the United Egg Producers, a trade group, tracks their share of the market.

It is harder to determine how many meat packages carry animal-welfare labels. There is general agreement, though, that it remains a small niche that will probably expand substantially when Whole Foods begins offering its animal-compassionate line in its 186 stores.

At one grocery outlet, at least, “certified humane” meat is selling briskly. D’Agostino, a small grocery chain in New York, said sales of meat jumped 25 percent since it added the “certified humane” logo, though the products cost, on average, 30 to 40 percent more.

Several other vendors said they believed that the animal-welfare labels have helped them in various ways. “It has probably helped sales, but it’s not really recordable,” said Steve Gold, vice president for marketing at Murray’s Chicken, which uses the “certified humane” label. “It helps the image of what we are trying to be as a company.”

Whole Foods, which recently banned the sale of live lobster amid welfare concerns, has been working on its animal compassionate standards for three

years and plans to unveil its logo in a few months, as soon as auditing guidelines are established to make sure farmers are following the rules. The initiative was started by Whole Foods' chief executive, John P. Mackey, a vegan who has been increasingly outspoken on animal-rights issues.

"We want to make sure that people know that it's real," said Margaret Wittenberg, vice president for communications and quality standards. "That it's not just marketing."

But some critics say all the new marketing labels will confuse consumers who are already struggling to decide between organic and antibiotic-free, grass-fed and natural.

"I have a great deal of concern over the animal welfare or certified humane-type programs, that they are meaningful and that they don't put forth that they do more than organics," said George Siemon, chief executive of Organic Valley, a Wisconsin cooperative that primarily sells dairy products. He noted that the federal government's organic standards include animal-welfare provisions, like prohibiting cages for laying hens and requiring outdoor access for livestock.

To remind consumers of the value of organic, the cooperative's meat brand, Organic Prairie, is playing off the profusion of new labels in its advertising. "Forget the marketing buzz words," says an ad showing a package of ham with six different labels. "Organic Prairie says it all."

At the same time, others question the validity of the certification programs for animal-welfare labels because some allow farming practices like cutting the tails off pigs and allowing animals to be raised entirely indoors.

For instance, the United Egg Producers provided an "animal care certified" logo to its members that several state attorneys general said was misleading because it falsely suggested that the chickens were humanely raised. While denying the charges, the group recently changed the label to say "United Egg Producers certified."

"One needs to understand the integrity of these seals of approval," said Bill Niman, the founder and chairman of Niman Ranch, a meat company that follows what he believes are rigorous animal-welfare protocols. "If the consumer knew how the animals are being raised that are receiving these seals of approval, it's quite different than what they envision. They have this bucolic vision" that is often "quite far from reality."

The federal government generally does not regulate how farm animals are treated. It has a voluntary program that, for a fee, audits organizations in order to verify their certification programs and their product labels.

Several animal-rights organizations now offer to certify animal-welfare labels to bolster their credibility. For instance, the American Humane Association oversees the “free farmed” program, while Humane Farm Animal Care administers the “certified humane” label. The Animal Welfare Institute plans to unveil its own label next month,

Along with Whole Foods, their animal welfare standards are each more rigorous than the industry norms. For instance, laying hens cannot be housed continuously in wire cages, which is the industry norm. And dairy cows, which are routinely raised indoors, must receive at least four hours of exercise a day. Their tails cannot be cut off either, an accepted industry practice.

Whole Foods has not yet completed its standards for dairy cows.

But there are differences among the humane certification programs, and the activists who run them argue over which program is better.

For instance, the Animal Welfare Institute and “free farmed” allow nose rings for pigs; the rings make rooting more difficult and prevent the pigs from tearing up the ground. The others do not allow rings.

Mike Jones, the North Carolina farmer, said he had no trouble meeting the standards. He has created his own version of hog heaven on 73 scrubby acres that stretch out behind the Mitchell Baptist Church.

Much of the land is divided into wire-rimmed pens in front of his house, where on a recent morning five massive sows snoozed on a thick bed of hay while dozens of pigs chased one another through the woods or nudged open feeder doors for corn and soybean meal.

While most pigs in the United States are raised in buildings derisively called “factory farms,” Mr. Jones, 42, has created a farm that is decidedly low tech. Even pig breeding, which is typically done by artificial insemination, is left to the whims of nature.

As with any romance, it does not always work so smoothly. For instance, a 550-pound pink sow grunted and squealed to ward off the advances of an even larger black boar.

“He’s attempting to be romantic with her, and she’s saying, ‘I’m not interested,’ ” Mr. Jones explained. When the boar bit off a mouthful of shrubs and chased after the sow, Mr. Jones remarked: “Look, he’s bringing her a bouquet of flowers. I’ve never seen that before.”

At the Whole Foods store in Durham, N.C., several customers said they would consider buying meat with the “animal compassionate” label, while others were undecided.

“To be honest with you, I don’t know,” said Christopher Martin, 44. “I’ve never thought about it before.”

“I’ve noticed cage free,” he added. “I never knew what it meant. It didn’t register.”

Martha Warburton, 62, said she did not have a problem with eating meat, though she also did not want farm animals to be mistreated. Still, when confronted with an “animal compassionate” label on meat, Ms. Warburton said, “I might not want to eat meat at all.”

Correction: Oct. 26, 2006

A front-page article on Tuesday about the increase in grocery chains using animal-welfare labels on agricultural products referred imprecisely to the government’s involvement in verifying the content of the labels. While the government generally does not regulate animal welfare standards, it does have a voluntary program that, for a fee, audits organizations in order to verify their certification programs and their product labels.