

Labeling conference tackles emerging trends

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by Bernard Shire

WASHINGTON, DC – The increasing importance of accurate food labeling to consumers, and the dismal prospects of the federal government taking any action to accurately define "natural" meat and poultry products, were two of the major issues discussed at Prime Label Consultants' 20th annual Federal Food Regulatory Conference, held April 28 and 29.

While food labeling has always been an important issue for meat and poultry processors from a regulatory standpoint, consumers have become much more interested in labeling, especially nutrition labeling, children's products labeling, as well as natural and organic identification. And for that reason, the pressure on food manufacturers to label their products accurately has escalated greatly, according to Jennifer Weber, a manager for national nutrition policy at the American Dietetic Association.

"Food consumers, including those who consume meat and poultry, are looking at a number of different factors when choosing products these days," Ms. Weber said. "They want their foods to be local, and come from companies that use 'green' practices. Some people are looking for vegetarian choices. Consumers today look at eating not just to quench hunger, but they want to eat healthy. They also want their products to be fresh and natural."

Ms. Weber noted some labels are more successful in the market place than others when it comes to illustrating health issues.

"In restaurants or in supermarkets, for example, the American Heart Association symbol, with the heart and the checkmark is the 'kiss of death' for a food product," she said. "But advertising using the word 'fresh' makes them much more attractive to consumers."

Robert G. Hibbert, an attorney with Kirkpatrick & Lockhart Preston Gates Ellis, predicted the U.S. Department of Agriculture will not settle what the term "natural" means when it is applied to meat and poultry products.

"Right now, I'd describe the situation at USDA concerning the terms 'natural' and 'naturally raised' as 'chaos'," Mr. Hibbert said. "As far as the record goes, for the terms 'natural' and 'naturally raised', there is no consensus."

"Naturally raised" has been discussed as an Agriculture Marketing Service fee program, and 44,000 comments have been received so far, mostly against it. There is no coherent 'natural' policy in effect, according to Mr. Hibbert.

The U.S.D.A. abandoned its Policy Memo 55 in 2005, and the current definition exists in the Food Standards and Labeling Policy Book under "natural claims."

"There are really two questions to answer here," Mr. Hibbert said. "Is USDA in a position to address complex issues like 'what does natural mean?' And what does industry really want?"

In his opinion, neither question has been answered.