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Released: Jan. 15, 2025

What am I buying? A guide to meat labels

K-State assistant professor discusses protein labeling

By [Jacob Klaudt](#), K-State Research and Extension news service

MANHATTAN, Kan. — “Gluten-free water” – she’s not sure what that means, but it was an actual claim that Kanas State University assistant professor of sustainable meat science Erin Beyer saw on a water bottle in Australia back in 2015.

While Beyer is not quite sure how a label this “interesting” was approved, she does know that many other claims printed on protein products can be difficult for consumers to navigate. To help clear up confusion, Beyer recently joined the [Agriculture Today radio program](#) to discuss the definitions of heavily used terms like “natural” and “certified organic,” and provide context for consumers.

“There is more label information today than I think there ever has been,” she said. “The most basic labeling system for commodity products, though, is the Uniform Retail Meat Identity Standards.”

Commodity markers – usually accompanied by a barcode and scale label – allow buyers to identify a cut of meat’s species, the wholesale area which it originated and whether it’s a steak or a roast. The meat industry classifies cuts thicker than 2 inches as roasts.

“The traditional label that comes on all commodity meat products helps people purchase products for their intended uses,” Beyer said. “So, it’s a system used that helps most buyers know they should not grill their roasts and should have a low, slow-type cooking method instead.”

Outside of commodity labeling, the branded meat sector has become more popular over the past couple decades and now encompasses more than 75% of the market, according to Beyer. Certified Angus Beef stands amongst the most popular brands, and its merchandise must pass through 10 parameters to qualify for CAB status.

“Like with any branded program, you can look those specifications up online and learn more about them,” she said. “A branded meat program usually is associated with premium meat or something in which purchasers have more trust that is higher quality than commodity.”

She added: “Is that always true? Maybe not so much. However, they do separate themselves with their brand specifications.”

However, consumers may find it challenging to discern natural products from “naturally raised” meat. Beyer said the key to understanding the differences lies in the phase of meat production they accompany.

“Natural meat is minimally processed post-harvest, has no artificial preservatives and contains all-natural ingredients like water and salt,” she said. “Naturally raised is about the animal process, meaning it has never experienced antibiotics, growth promotants or additional hormones.”

Beyer notes that most meat sold in stores falls under natural classification, however, not all processors take the time to get their goods approved for the label.

On the same note, the USDA prohibits giving certain livestock species – like poultry and swine – additional hormones, which may puzzle shoppers who see the designation “raised without added hormones” on beef and lamb products.

“There are hormones in all animal products,” Beyer said. “We produce hormones as living beings just like animals produce hormones, so nothing is ever hormone-free, yet processors can tag meat as raised without added hormones if they did not receive hormone implants.”

Moreover, a certified organic marker takes the requirements for claims like ‘raised without added hormones’ and ‘natural’ a step further by including that producers must raise meat animals using organic methods while feeding organic ingredients.

“Organic methods are a little vague, but those parameters actually start at the last trimester of gestation for our red meat species and the first day of life for poultry,” Beyer said.

Beyer reminds protein purchasers, however, that certified organic and other claims do not mean that these goods differ in nutritional content nor change in food safety versus products without those labels.

More information about food product labeling is [available online](#) through the USDA.

-30-

FOR PRINT PUBLICATIONS: Links used in this story
Agriculture Today, [Agriculture Today: 1846 - 2025 Weed Guide...Meat Labels](#)

USDA National Agricultural Library, <https://www.nal.usda.gov/human-nutrition-and-food-safety/food-labeling>

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