

Food Eco-Labels A Purchasing Guide

Our industrialized food system is very complex. As a result, it is not surprising that studies show that regardless of background, most people do not know where their food comes from or how it was grown. Food procurement professionals interested in supporting a sustainable food system will require education and new tools to help them distinguish between skillful marketing claims and those products and producers supporting foods that are sustainably raised. One strategy food purchasing professionals can employ is the purchase of eco-labeled foods—foods produced by farmers and/or food processors whose operations have been verified by independent organizations to meet specific and transparent environmental or social standards.

Sustainable Foods

While there is no strict definition of sustainable foods, such foods have multiple attributes. Some of these attributes are listed below but in general provide a collective description that encompasses nutritional value, farm worker health and safety, economic and social justice and environmental protections.

- Proximate – food is purchased from the closest practicable source with the intention, among others, of minimizing energy use in transportation
- Healthy – as part of a nutritious balanced diet and produced without harmful biological or chemical contaminants

- Fairly or cooperatively traded between producers, processors, retailers, and consumers and without exploitation of employees in the food and agriculture sector
- Environmentally beneficial or benign in its production
- High animal welfare standards in both production and transport
- Encouraging knowledge and understanding of food and food culture

Food purchasers should understand that no one eco-label certification available today covers all these attributes. As a result there is not one eco-label purchasing solution to how your facility or system can best support healthy food production. This is why having a direct relationship, including farm visits, with a local producer can often provide a much clearer understanding about on-farm practices. For many facilities this is not always possible. By exploring different eco-label certification systems a facility can design a purchasing strategy to best fit their unique needs and interests.

Food Eco-label Overview

Health care organizations have an opportunity to support healthy communities and environmentally sustainable growing practices by purchasing eco-labeled foods. Eco-labeled foods enable purchasers to compare and contrast various social and environmental criteria while ensuring confidence in product claims.

A variety of third-party programs certify growers whose practices support different aspects of sustainable food production. Keep in mind that most eco-label certifications address some, not all, of these issues, and that different certifications take different approaches to evaluating them. Following this document is a list of several of the major food certifications available on the market today and their approaches to the issues listed below.

Common Sustainable Food Production Issues Addressed by Eco-labels

Soil and Water Conservation

Wind and water erosion of exposed topsoil, soil compaction and loss of soil organic matter are among the causes of decline in soil productivity. Overuse of surface and ground water for irrigation can lead to water scarcity. Some certifications promote the use of reduced or no-tillage farming and irrigation techniques to prevent soil erosion, protect soil quality and reduce water use to prevent water shortages and soil decline.

Pesticides and Synthetic Fertilizers

The use of agricultural pesticides can expose farm workers and residents in rural communities to toxic health threats, and has resulted in widespread contamination of ground and surface water. Pesticide exposures are associated with chronic neurological problems, behavioral problems, impaired reproduction, birth defects and cancer. Nutrient runoff affects ecosystems in many rivers, lakes, and oceans. Synthetic fertilizer use is also associated with declining soil fertility. Certifications that prohibit the use of synthetic pesticides and fertilizers aim to protect soil fertility, the natural environment and human health from these dangers.

Integrated Pest Management (IPM)

In lieu of complete restriction of synthetic pesticides and fertilizers, some certifications employ an approach to solving pest problems known as Integrated Pest Management. Definitions of IPM vary widely, but generally include combining pesticide use with natural pest control tactics. Because IPM techniques vary, it may be necessary to investigate different certifiers' definitions in evaluating their standards.

Genetically Engineered Crops

Genetically engineered foods are created by splicing genes from unrelated species—microorganism, plant, animal or even human genes—

into common food crops, in order to produce foods that could not be produced via traditional breeding techniques. There are limited data on the safety of releasing genetically engineered crops into the natural environment or on the long-term health effects of consuming genetically engineered food. Many farmers' organizations and rural development advocates oppose the technology. Some certifiers prohibit the use of genetically engineered crops because of these safety concerns.

Worker Health and Safety

Agricultural work is often dangerous, and labor practices in industrial agriculture have been among the worst of any industry. Widespread pesticide use in industrial scale food production exposes farm workers and their families to dangerous chemicals, often at levels that exceed established safety limits. Industrialized meat packing is recognized as one of the most dangerous occupations: every year, over one quarter of all workers needs medical attention beyond first aid. Some certifications address these concerns with measures rating the safety of working conditions.

Worker Compensation

Many farm workers receive low wages, with earnings that average far below official poverty levels. Certifications that address worker compensation consider whether workers are treated fairly, are rewarded for seniority and/or performance, and are paid competitive wages and benefits.

Farmer Compensation

Farmers sometimes receive prices for their crops that are less than the costs of production. Certifications that address farmer compensation assure that farmers are paid a fair price.

Antibiotics

Antibiotic resistant bacteria are an increasing concern to health care

professionals. The largest volume of antibiotic use is in animal production. In fact, approximately 70% of all antibiotics produced are given to healthy farm animals, to promote growth or to prevent infections that result from livestock confinement. The scientific consensus is that antibiotic overuse in food animals contributes to antibiotic resistance in organisms that can cause human disease. Buying organic meat (raised without antibiotics) or meat products certified as raised without the use of non-therapeutic antibiotics is one way to contribute to the solution of reducing antibiotic overuse.

Hormones

Synthetic hormones are used in industrial meat and dairy production to promote growth or increase milk production. Health and animal welfare concerns have led the European Union and other nations to ban some hormones still in use in the U.S. Some certifications prohibit or restrict the use of synthetic hormones in meat and dairy production.

Animal Welfare

In confined, factory farms, animals are raised in conditions that make it impossible for them to live lives in keeping with their natural (or inherent) behavioral tendencies. Moreover the associated stress can cause new behaviors or exacerbate natural behaviors such as pecking or biting. To prevent this, poultry are routinely debeaked and other animals have tails removed. On farms that support animal welfare, animals have sufficient space to carry out their natural (or inherent) behaviors, such as grazing, rooting or pecking. They also have shelter, fresh water and are fed a natural diet appropriate for their species. Certifications that examine animal welfare or natural behavior evaluate the living conditions of animals and prohibit or restrict practices that deny animals the conditions needed for their natural behaviors.

General Label Claims

General label claims or first party claims are unverified and typically used by the producer. It is important to recognize that these may be intentionally used to mislead and have little or no utility for those interested in supporting a healthy food system.

Antibiotic-free – HCWH does not recommend use of this term as it can be construed to mean “free of residues.” In addition, the term is considered “unapprovable” by the USDA and banned from use on poultry and meat labels.

No hormones added/No hormones administered – These are federally recognized terms that mean that no hormones have been used over the course of the animal’s life. Producers may make this claim on beef product labels if sufficient documentation is provided to the USDA. Since federal regulations prohibit the use of all hormones in pork and poultry production, these producers may only use these label claims if they include the statement “Federal regulations prohibit the use of hormones” on the label. This claim is considered only “somewhat” meaningful as there is no

other organization behind this claim other than the company producing or marketing the product.

Free Range – USDA has a standard only for poultry and considers access to the out doors enough to meet the definition. There is no standard for beef or eggs. This definition should be considered meaningless.

Natural – While there is a definition of natural, because the label has no verification it should be considered relatively meaningless.

Frequently Asked Questions

What Is Certification?

Certifications are a means of measuring achievement or progress toward goals.

What Are the Major Certification Categories?

Certification goals and standards relate to a wide variety of interests and goals. Some certifications focus on a single goal, while others incorporate several goals. Common certification categories include:

- Environment/Organic
- Animal Welfare
- Labor/Worker Welfare
- Fair Trade

Why Does Certification Matter?

Certifications are important to purchasers’ efforts to “buy what they believe.” Credible certifications enable purchasers to compare and contrast options while ensuring confidence in product claims.

Who Certifies the Food?

There are three categories of certifiers:

- **First-party** – Producers state that they have produced their products in a certain way. Since no outside

verification applies, buyers need to invest time to assess the validity or trust the producer.

- **Second-party** – A company (often the buyer) certifies that a producer has met a certain set of guidelines. Verifiers have a vested interest, thus the same caveat applies as with first-party certifiers.
- **Third-party** – An independent party with no vested interest in the outcome undertakes an audit to determine if the producer has met set standards. Third-party certifications are considered the most credible.

What Are the Differences Between the Certifications?

There are many differences between the certifications, both in the goals they address and how they choose to address them, and these are best understood by reviewing the certifiers’ standards and asking questions.

It is important to understand that there are a number of different ways certifiers may choose to address an area important to your organization. For example, in regard to pesticides

certifiers may choose one of several approaches, including:

- restricting the use of all synthetic pesticides;
- restricting the use of pesticides proven to have particularly dangerous long-term effects; and
- restricting the use of pesticides proven to cause dangerous acute effects.

What Are the Limits of Certifications?

Certifications are not perfect. There are several limitations that are important to note.

Secondly, certifications are generally not related to proximity. If “buying local” is your priority, you cannot necessarily count on a certified food to be local. Your organic oranges may have been shipped to California from Florida.

Currently, there are no certifications that distinguish between large, corporate farms and small, family farms. Though some certifications might be easier to obtain for less industrialized farms, if supporting small, local farmers is important to you, there is currently no third party certification that can directly help.

Finally, from the perspective of many small farmers some certification processes can be expensive and time-consuming. Some small farmers may adopt sustainable practices on their own, but simply cannot afford to participate in certain certification processes.

What If I Want To Buy Local Products?

Buying local is a great way to support a sustainable food system. Currently, no US certifying body emphasizes locally produced foods. However, some states do have campaigns such as the *California Grown* or *Minnesota Grown* which establish a logo for food items to help your institution identify items that have been grown or raised within the state. If locally grown is a priority for your institution, consider working with small to mid-sized farmers in your region. While some smaller farmers cannot afford to become certified, many are using sustainable growing practices.

How Can I Tell if a Certification is Credible?

This list of questions is a good starting place for reviewing certifications: Does the certification have:

- Clearly stated principles and criteria?
- Measurable and transparent (publicly available) standards?
- Third-party verification?
- Improvements to standards as science, technology and markets allow?

Which Certification is "The Best?"

There is no one certification that "has it all." The first and most important step in approaching certifications is to identify your own priorities first. Evaluate certifications based on how well they address the concerns important to your organization.

What If I Can't Find a Certification That Offers What I'm Looking For?

Ask for it! If there are no products available that match your priorities, tell farmers/distributors what you are looking for and specify the quantities you are interested in purchasing. Market demand will drive change and innovation.

Where Can I Go For More Information?

For an overview of third party certification systems, please see The Consumers Union Guide to Eco-Labels at www.eco-labels.org.

You can refer to the following third party certifier websites for more specific information on current availability and products certified:

Certified Humane:
www.certifiedhumane.com

Fair Trade Certified:
www.transfairusa.org

Food Alliance:
www.foodalliance.org

Free Farmed Certification Program:
www.americanhumane.org/freefarmed

Protected Harvest:
www.protectedharvest.org

Rainforest Alliance:
www.rainforest-alliance.org

USDA Organic:
www.ams.usda.gov/nop/indexIE.htm
(numerous state level official USDA accredited certifiers exist)

The Health Care Without Harm Healthy Food in Health Care Website contains a wide variety of in depth health care specific news, purchasing tools, educational materials, case studies, reports and related links:

Health Care Without Harm
www.healthyfoodinhealthcare.org



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