

Grass-Fed Standards for Ruminants

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Introduction

What is “grass-fed” beef? As grass-fed cattle become more common in the marketplace, so do questions from producers and consumers. Beef producers are asking how to properly produce grass-fed beef and what marketing opportunities are available. Consumers are inquiring about the healthfulness and nutritional advantages of grass-fed beef and want to know how they can be assured beef labeled “grass-fed” was really grass-fed raised.

Individuals and companies often highlight production and marketing practices in advertisements and promotions to distinguish their products in the marketplace. Since the late 1970s, livestock and meat producers (individuals and companies) have requested the voluntary services of the Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS) to verify or certify specific practices to increase the value of their products. The Livestock and Seed Program of the Agricultural Marketing Service has provided certification, through direct product examination, for a number of production claims related to livestock and carcass characteristics.

The Agricultural Marketing Service established a voluntary standard for a grass- (forage-) fed livestock marketing claim. The standard incorporated revisions made as a result of comments received from industry. With the establishment of the voluntary standard, livestock

producers may request that a grass- (forage-) fed claim be verified by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). Verification of this claim will be accomplished through an audit of the production process, and the meat sold from these approved programs can carry a claim verified by USDA.

Grass-Fed Validation

The validity of such claims was enhanced since the product was labeled as “USDA Certified.” The Livestock and Seed Program also offers verification services through Quality System Verification Programs to substantiate claims that cannot be determined by direct examination of livestock, their carcasses, component parts or the finished product. The Quality System Verification Programs provide suppliers of agricultural products or services the opportunity to distinguish specific activities involved in the production and processing of their agricultural products and to assure customers of their ability to provide consistent quality products or services.

Validation is accomplished by documenting the quality management program and having the manufacturing or service delivery processes verified through independent, third-party audits. One specific Quality System Verification Program is the USDA Process Verified Program which allows suppliers to make marketing claims – such as feeding practices or other raising and

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processing claims – and label and market their products as “USDA Process Verified.”

As multiple marketers of specialized claims began to seek USDA certification or verification for the same or similar production practices, the Agricultural Marketing Service determined it would be beneficial to establish standards for common production and marketing claims, and these standards will collectively be a part of the voluntary U.S. Standards for Livestock and Meat Marketing Claims that may be used in conjunction with a certified or verified program recognized by the Agricultural Marketing Service.

The livestock and meat marketing claim standards will be instrumental in facilitating communication, establishing a common trade language and enhancing understanding among producers, processors and consumers. Past experience indicates that standards sort a highly diverse population into more homogeneous groups, and when standards are uniformly applied, they provide a valuable marketing tool. The Agricultural Marketing Service developed standards for marketing and production claims based on experience with USDA Certified Programs and USDA Quality System Verification Programs, research into standard practices and procedures and requests from the livestock and meat industries.

One such production practice is the raising of livestock on grasslands or forage products. Accordingly, the Agricultural Marketing Service established the voluntary grass- (forage-) fed marketing claim standard. The Agricultural Marketing Service obtained input from a number of individual experts in government, industry and academia while drafting this standard and the corresponding thresholds for compliance. Product labels that include the grass- (forage-) fed marketing claim must be submitted to USDA's Food Safety and Inspection Service, Labeling and Program Delivery Division, for evaluation prior to use. The Food Safety and Inspection Service, Labeling and Program Delivery Division, under the authority of the Federal Meat Inspection Act and the Poultry Products Inspection Act, regulates domestic and imported meat, poultry and egg product labeling, standards and ingredients.

The Agricultural Marketing Service has worked closely with the Food Safety and Inspection Service, Labeling and Program Delivery Division, to develop the voluntary grass- (forage-) fed marketing claim standard. The standard for a grass- (forage-) fed marketing claim is part of the voluntary U.S. Standards for Livestock and Meat Marketing Claims which may be used in conjunction with a USDA

Quality System Verification Program. Grass- (forage-) fed marketing claims may be verified by a feeding protocol that confirms a grass- (forage-) based diet. However, since this is a voluntary marketing claim, Food Safety and Inspection Service will not establish a new provision to limit the use of the term grass- (forage-) fed to labels in which participants have a USDA Quality System Verification Program. Any specific labeling issues or questions not related to Agricultural Marketing Service services should be directed to the Food Safety and Inspection Service, Labeling and Program Delivery Division.

Grass- (Forage-) Fed Claim

This claim applies to ruminant animals and the meat and meat products derived from such animals whose diet, throughout their lifespan, with the exception of milk (or milk replacer) consumed prior to weaning, is solely derived from forage, which for the purpose of this claim is any edible herbaceous plant material that can be grazed or harvested for feeding, with the exception of grain. Forage-based diets can be derived from grass (annual and perennial), forbs (e.g., legumes, *Brassica*) and browse (leaves of woody plants such as shrubs).

Grass- (Forage-) Fed Standard

- Grass and forage shall be the feed source consumed for the lifetime of the ruminant animal, with the exception of milk consumed prior to weaning. The diet shall be derived solely from forage consisting of grass (annual and perennial), forbs (e.g., legumes, *Brassica*), browse or cereal grain crops in the vegetative (pre-grain) state.
- Animals cannot be fed grain or grain byproducts and must have continuous access to pasture during the growing season.
- Growing season is defined as the time period extending from the average date of the last frost in spring to the average date of the first frost in the fall in the local area of production.
- Hay, haylage, baleage, silage, crop residue without grain and other roughage sources may also be included as acceptable feed sources.
- Consumption of seeds naturally attached to forage is acceptable. However, crops normally harvested for grain (including but not limited to corn, soybean, rice, wheat and oats) are only eligible feed if they are foraged or harvested in the vegetative state (pre-grain).
- Routine mineral and vitamin supplementation may also be included in the feeding regimen.

- If incidental supplementation occurs due to inadvertent exposure to non-forage feedstuffs or to ensure the animal's well-being at all times during adverse environmental or physical conditions, the producer must fully document (e.g., receipts, ingredients and tear tags) the supplementation that occurs including the amount, the frequency and the supplements provided.
- Upon request, verification of this claim will be accomplished through an audit of the production process. The producer must be able to verify for AMS that the grass (forage) marketing claim standard requirements are being met through a detailed documented quality management system.

The U.S. Standards for Livestock and Meat Marketing Claims, Grass- (Forage-) Fed Claim for Ruminant Livestock and the Meat Products Derived from Such Livestock is available by accessing the Web site at http://www.ams.usda.gov/AMSV1.0/ams_fetchTemplateData.do?template=TemplateN&navID=GrassFedMarketingClaimStandards&rightNav1=GrassFedMarketingClaimStandards&topNav=&leftNav=GradingCertificationandVerification&page=GrassFedMarketingClaims&resultType=&acct=lss. The effective date for these standards was November 15, 2007.

Printed by University of Arkansas Cooperative Extension Service Printing Services.

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FSA3122-PD-4-2014RV