

natural or not?

Seemingly everyone has an idea of what “natural” meat means or should mean. Now, USDA is on the eve of issuing a pair of standards that look to have the final word.

By John Gregerson, editor

There was a time, and not that long ago, when Austin, Minn.-based Hormel Foods Corp., the Tiffany’s of further processed meats, used the antimicrobial sodium lactate to protect the integrity of its Bread Ready line of sliced deli product.

Then, in May 2005, Hormel used the National Restaurant Association show to introduce a new, non-thermal, post-packaging pasteurization method called True Taste, a technology that relies upon high hydrostatic pressure — 87,000 pounds per square inch — to break down bacteria and inhibit the growth of organisms that cause spoilage.

Thereafter, a new line of natural deli meats was born. “Who decided ham needed to be filled with preservatives and artificial ingredients just so it could taste like ham?” print ads queried. “That’s just crazy talk.”

Actions, as the saying goes, tend to trump talk, which is why on Oct. 9 of last year, Phillip L. Minerich, Hormel’s vice president of research and development, and Mark S. Roberts, the company’s manager of technical services and regulatory affairs, submitted a petition to Robert C. Post, director of labeling and consumer protection for USDA’s Food Safety and Inspection Service, requesting that its old

ally sodium lactate, recently added to the list of ingredients acceptable for use in natural meats, be kindly removed, owing to its function as a preservative.

The petition’s authors not only assailed the corn-derived product, but insisted some kind of rule was in order “to abate inconsistencies” in the current policy. “If FSIS is to provide for the consumer and prevent misleading labeling and the associated erosion of the ‘natural’ claim,” the petition read, “it must codify a clear and consistent definition of ‘natural’ that comports with consumers’ already established beliefs.”

Bingo. The problem was — and is — that sodium lactate may be the least of it in the eyes of consumers, who have come to associate the term natural with cattle grazing in bucolic pastures, without growth hormones, animal antibiotics and feed made from animal byproducts. Credit the marketing efforts of Niman Ranch, Coleman Natural Foods and others for broadening the perception — if not the definition — of natural from ante-mortem practices to a vista spanning from farm to table.

SOME IN, SOME OUT

So, the Hormel petition hit a nerve, and at a time when other stakeholders were



growing increasingly vocal on the issue.

FSIS spokesman Steve Cohen says that after a series of USDA-hosted hearings in late 2006 and early 2007, his department’s labeling and consumer protection division went to work on a forthcoming rule that presumably clarifies issues raised in the Hormel petition, which also targets an FSIS provision allowing processors to reference the National Organic Policy for acceptable ingredients for all-natural claims.

So, depending on which way the scale tips, some ingredients may be in, and some out.

But the bigger news comes from another wing of that bulky stone edifice along Washington’s mall. As FSIS pre-

pires to issue its proposed rule, perhaps as early as September, according to Cohen, USDA's Agriculture Marketing Service is preparing to issue a marketing claim standard for naturally raised livestock, a sort of ying to the yang of the original FSIS definition, which amounts to a work of astounding minimalism: No artificial ingredients. No preservatives. Minimally processed. That's it.

Like the forthcoming FSIS rule, the genesis of the AMS standard lies with those winter hearings. At a Jan. 18 meeting held in Seattle, Hormel "stakeholder" Roberts found himself swimming against the tide. After Darrell Woods, founder and president of natural meat company Panorama Grass-Fed Meats, and natural

meats titan Mel Coleman had their say, he suggested that consumers in search of antibiotic-free and hormone-free product shop organic.

He then alternatively suggested that issues of animal husbandry be addressed in a "separate, independent, traditionally or responsibly raised labeling claim."

Which is the plan. "We had several discussions with our colleagues at FSIS and decided to go ahead and give it a try," says Bill Sessions, associate deputy administrator of AMS's Livestock and

Feed Program. "It will be a marketing claims standard that processors and producers could use as part of a process-verified program." Assuming meat products conform to the provisions promulgated by the FSIS and AMS standards, they could potentially wear two labels — "naturally processed," which would account for the way meat product is treated, and "naturally raised," which would address issues of production.

Sessions was reluctant to divulge any particulars concerning the forthcoming

proposal, indicating it would be "premature" to do so before it is issued. "Let's just say we're looking at a number of factors, which anyone who attended the hearings is probably aware of," he says.

So the standard will — or perhaps won't — round up all of the usual suspects, from antibiotics, hormones and vegetable feed to animal handling and confinement.

"We'll have to see. The devil is in the details," says Robert Hibbert, a Washington-based attorney and veteran of cases involving food labeling claims.

Hibbert conjectures that if "naturally

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raised” incorporates the practices of Niman Ranch, Coleman Natural Foods and others, “it should give processors of their ilk a meaningful point of differentiation for their marketing platforms.”

He says he isn’t particularly surprised the hearings didn’t result in an initiative to add raising practices to the FSIS definition, “whose sole focus remains ante-mortem practices.” The dual-label scenario, he says, “suggests USDA is groping for consensus.”

Jeff Tripician, Niman Ranch’s VP of sales, puts it more succinctly: “They’re trying to straddle a razor blade.”

He, too, isn’t particularly surprised. “Natural product, as many have come to understand it — no antibiotics, no growth hormones and no vegetarian feed — amounts to \$800 million in annual sales. Add to that all the other products that are simply naturally processed, and you’re talking about many billions of dollars. Does anyone think that kind of money is going to just quietly go away?”

ONE RULE

Though he is willing to reserve judgment until the standards are issued, Tripician confesses to having had higher hopes, as

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does Chris Ely, founder of Bridgewater, N.J.-based Applegate Farms, a processor of both natural and organic meats.

“Should there be a single rule that speaks to how the animal is raised and processed?” Ely asks. “Absolutely. How can anyone construe an animal that is fed animal byproducts as natural? Or one that’s fed antibiotics as a matter of routine maintenance? How can anyone consider commercially raised meat to be natural?”

The irony, says Patty Lovera, a director of Washington-based consumer watchdog Food and Water Watch, is that dual labels may further confuse the issue for consumers. Though she, like others, is reserving judgment pending issuance of the standards, she says the larger concern is whether they will “still allow room for abuses. How much wiggle room is



there to deceive consumers while charging a premium for it?”

It’s a question that has dogged the category for years, principally because natural claims aren’t process-verified, as organic claims are, says Ely. “A processor can come in, say he’s going to process a

product containing certain ingredients, and then leave. It’s an honor system.”

“There are processors,” Tripician says, “that have slapped a natural label on their product without ever having done a thing.”

Fact is, some don’t have to. The more fundamental question is whether the FSIS standard should change simply because industry practices have, often to provide a point of differentiation in a nascent but highly competitive category.

To the chagrin of consumer groups, resulting “natural” products have come to assume the profile of organic — or organic lite, as some have come to call it. “The basic argument is, if we have organic, we don’t need semi-organic,” says Hibbert. “You’re either there or you’re not. I don’t know if there’s a good answer to that.”

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"Naturally raised" isn't the answer Joe Mendelson, legal director with Washington-based consumer group Center for Food Safety, has in mind. "It bumps up against organic," he says. "What we need is a definition of natural that clearly and correctly conveys to consumers how the meat was processed, not how it was produced. I don't think that 'naturally raised' is going to confer any substantial meaning to consumers."

A single label — and a single standard — that reads "naturally processed," would, he maintains.

Ely believes consumers have no trouble distinguishing between natural and

organic. If nothing else, price tells the tale. "When I pay for natural, I pay a little more than I do for commercial. When I pay for organic, I pay double," he says. Because the two are similar in all aspects but feeding practices, natural meats "provide consumers with a more cost-effective alternative."

Nevertheless, few deny the lines have been blurred — between natural and organic, natural and naturally raised, and all combinations therein.

So everyone awaits clarification, regardless of whether they'll get it. Consider the following scenario proffered by Barry Carpenter, CEO of the National

Meat Association and former deputy administrator of the AMS Livestock and Seed Program. Assuming the meat component of beef jerky comes from a naturally raised animal, should it carry the label "naturally raised" even if it doesn't meet the policy definition for "naturally processed?"

He and others believe it should.

Clarification or confusion? It's in the eye of the stakeholder, and in this case, there are plenty to go around.

Hormel lit the match. Now all that remains to be seen is whether it becomes consumed by a conflagration of its own making. ©