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FACT Opposes New Naturally Raised Standard

Label claim helps the food industry but doesn't improve animal welfare

CHICAGO, JANUARY 26, 2009 - Food Animal Concerns Trust (FACT) opposes the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) voluntary standard for "naturally raised" livestock that was issued on January 21st, saying the standard falls short of consumer expectations of what "naturally raised" really means.

As adopted, the standard states that meat products displaying the USDA "naturally raised" label claim came from animals that were raised without (1) growth promotants, (2) antibiotics (except for ionophores used as coccidiostats for parasite control), and (3) animal by-products in their feed.

The standard does not address any other animal production issues beyond these three basic management practices. It does not include any welfare husbandry requirements that would allow animals to express their natural behaviors (such as nest building for sows or dust-bathing and pecking for chickens) or preclude the use of intensive confinement production practices (such as gestation and farrowing crates, veal crates, tethers, slatted floors over manure pits, and battery cages for poultry).

After proposing the standard in November 2007, the USDA received more than 44,000 public comments, the majority opposing it as written because of its narrow focus. In oral and written testimony, FACT urged the Agency to expand the standard to include specific animal welfare guidelines. The USDA decided not to make any substantial revisions to the standard before issuing the final version a day after President Obama was inaugurated, even in light of these serious concerns.

"Now more than ever, consumers are interested in purchasing humanely-raised food products. The label falls short in not addressing management practices that define how the animal was raised, including their living and growing conditions," said FACT's Executive Director, Richard Wood. "A 'naturally raised' label that includes consideration of these practices is what consumers want and what farm animals need. Unfortunately, the USDA seems to have disregarded the recommendations voiced in the vast majority of the comments it received."

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In addition to the lack of animal welfare provisions in the standard, the standard also fails to clarify the difference between “naturally raised” and “natural” for consumers. The “natural” claim applies solely to processing and added ingredients and does not consider the husbandry and production practices used to raise food animals. FACT believes any USDA-approved term that includes the word “natural” should be a comprehensive definition, applicable not only to the raising of livestock from birth to harvest, but also to slaughter methods and final processing of the end product, not livestock production only or processing only. An all encompassing term would eliminate the potential for confusion as consumers may see a “natural” or “all natural” product on the shelf and mistakenly believe the animal from which that meat or poultry product was produced was also “naturally raised.” This is currently not the case.

Founded in 1982 by Robert A. Brown, FACT is a Chicago based non-profit dedicated to making farms healthier and more humane places to raise food animals through research, advocacy and education. FACT was the first U.S. organization devoted exclusively to addressing and alleviating farm animal problems. The organization relies on firsthand, on-farm research to make science-based recommendations to federal regulatory agencies and as the basis for organizing a broad public response. For more information, contact Richard Wood at (773) 525-4952 or visit www.foodanimalconcerns.org.

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