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FSIS Docket Room
Docket Clerk
U.S. Department of Agriculture
Food Safety and Inspection Service
300 12th Street, SW
Room 102 Cotton Annex
Washington, DC 20250

Comments: Docket No. FSIS-2006-0040

Product Labeling: Definition of the Term “Natural”

Product marketing claims should be truthful and not mislead consumers. They should assist the public in making healthful food choices and integrating them into a well-balanced diet.

The American Dietetic Association (ADA), representing 65,000 food and nutrition professionals who serve the public by promoting good health through diet and physical activity, appreciates the opportunity to offer comments regarding Hormel Foods’ petition to establish a definition for the voluntary claim “natural” and to delineate the conditions under which the claim can be used on labels of meat and poultry products. Together, the definition and conditions must be:

- Factually based
- Understandable to consumers
- Harmonious with definitions of “natural” used by other agencies that oversee food and beverage claims and advertisements
- Be suitable for today’s food distribution systems and
- Ensure and maintain food product safety

Attached to this letter is a copy of ADA’s principles for labeling which form the framework and context for our comments (Appendix A). We also provide additional comments below supported by citations and refer FSIS to relevant ADA position papers which rely scientific evidence published in peer-reviewed journals.^{1,2}

Consumer research is essential

A labeling claim has two functions: 1) to be useful and meaningful to consumers in choosing foods and 2) to achieve a food producer’s desired marketing goals. Therefore, before initiating rule-making, ADA urges the USDA to conduct consumer research studies to better understand public perception of the

¹ Wansink B. Position of the American Dietetic Association: Food and Nutrition Misinformation. June 2006 (Journal of the American Dietetic Association. Vol. 106, Issue 6, Pages 601-607).

² Hasler CM, Bloch AS, Thomson CA. Position of the American Dietetic Association: Functional foods. May 2004 (Journal of the American Dietetic Association. Vol. 104, Issue 5, Pages 814-826).

term “natural.” While it seems intuitive that a meat product bearing this claim would be minimally processed, not contain synthetic additives and even be packaged in a particular way, we do not know whether the public shares this view or ranks each parameter equally. In designing such a study, USDA would need to identify whether consumers would allow some processing methods and packaging and not others, and whether disclaimers would be acceptable if a product could not achieve a stated condition.

Recent research suggests also that not all consumers trust label claims.³ A well-designed study should provide FSIS the data they need to establish a definition for a “natural” claim that is credible and trusted by consumers, since they are more likely to trust claims for which the government has created precise definitions and stringent criteria. If it is not, the claim will be dismissed and neither the consumer nor industry will benefit.⁴ A recent annotated bibliography of consumer research is available on the internet.⁵

Interagency claim harmonization is needed to reduce consumer confusion

ADA urges FSIS to work with FDA and the Alcohol and Tobacco Trade and Taxation Bureau (ATTTB) in consultation with the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) to develop a single working definition of the term “natural” for food and beverage products. FDA⁶, ATTTB⁷ and FTC⁸ have addressed “natural” in various rulings and communiqués or been petitioned to establishment a definition.

For additional information or clarification of these comments, please contact me at 202-775-8277, ext. 6007 or mhager@eatright.org.

Sincerely,



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Senior Manager, Regulatory Affairs

ATTACHMENT: Appendix A

³ Busby JC, Ready RC. Do consumers trust food-safety information? January 1996; Food Review; Economic Research Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture. <http://www.ers.usda.gov/publications/foodreview/jan1996/frjan96h.pdf> Accessed January 10, 2007.

⁴ NFO Donovan Research. A qualitative consumer study related to food-type dietary supplement labeling. July, 2003. <http://www.foodstandards.gov.au/srcfiles/FTDS%20FINAL%20report.pdf> Accessed January 10, 2007.

⁵ Williams P. Annotated bibliography of publications on consumer use of health claims. National Centre of Excellence in Functional Foods. January 2006. <http://www.nceff.com.au/pdf/Annotated%20Biblio-v5.pdf> accessed January 10, 2007.

⁶ Sugar Association, Citizen petition re definition of the term “natural” for making claims on foods and beverages regulated by the Food and Drug Administration, February 28, 2006. http://www.sugar.org/media/pdfs/naturalpetition.pdf#Sugar_Association_Natural_Petition Accessed January 10, 2007.

⁷ ATF Ruling 85-4. <http://www.ttb.gov/rulings/85-4.htm> Accessed January 10, 2007.

⁸ FTC Comment on Draft Report of the Commission on Dietary Supplement Labels. August 14, 1997. <http://www.lawpublish.com/ftc-diet.html> Accessed January 10, 2007.

American Dietetic Association Labeling Principles

When considering proposed labeling rules, ADA uses the following principles to guide its comments. These are not exclusive, but are the foundation for all comments regarding labels:

- A. Label claims should be clear and understandable to consumers.
- B. The label must be truthful and not misleading.
- C. Content on the label should help consumers make informed decisions to build a healthy diet.
- D. Label content should have consistent type and format so products can be read and consumers can make product comparisons.
- E. All claims should include labeling of accurate quantitative information about the dietary substance, including percent of Daily Values in a single serving of the product, when known, or the daily dietary intake necessary to achieve the claimed effect.
- F. Consumer research is imperative before making changes to the label.
- G. The label is only a source of information, and thus sustained support for educational programs and individual counseling by registered dietitians is essential.

ADA believes that consumer research is critical in determining whether labeling formats and contents are understandable and for ensuring that allowable nutrient and health claims are not misleading. Furthermore, consumers should be able to understand the information in the context of their total diet and their individual health concerns.

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Labeling Task Force

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