



Making Sure Green Consumer Claims Are Truthful

Product labels and certifications may suggest protection without standards or disclosure

By Nichelle Harriott and Natalie Lounsbury

Be wary of “green consumer” claims. Growing consumer interest in environmental issues has encouraged many companies to pursue environmentally sound or “green” images. Although there are a growing number of reputable companies, unfortunately, many businesses only change their image and not their product or service! The best defense against false claims is to look at product labels closely and to question salespeople with a critical ear. According to the Federal Trade Commission (FTC), to evaluate environmental claims in advertising and on product labels, look for specific information. Determine whether the claims apply to the product, the packaging, or both.

Examine labels...

Don't trust the company's marketing claims. It is important to read product labels and Material Safety Data Sheets (MSDS) and find out the ingredients being used. The ingredients speak for themselves. If you are unsure about one or more ingredients, or do not understand the label, you may wish to research them either on the internet, at the local library or by contacting a group knowledgeable about that type of product, such as Beyond Pesticides (info@beyondpesticides.org, 202-543-5450).

Question service people...

When a service provider asserts that he or she has an alternative lawn or indoor pest control service, find out the specifics of their program - an integrated pest management program is only as good as the principles of the person providing it. Here are some points to keep in mind:

1. What products do they consider acceptable?
2. Do they monitor regularly for pests (good) or spray on a

schedule (bad)?

3. Do they attempt to determine the cause of the pest problem and fix it (good) or do they treat the symptoms - current pest infestation - only (bad)?
4. Do they keep records of their monitoring results?
5. What training do they have and are they knowledgeable in alternative services?
6. Is most of their business in chemically-based programs or alternative practices and products?
7. If they provide both chemicals and alternatives, do the various applicators use different trucks and equipment, or are they spraying your lawn with soap from a spray tank that recently carried a toxic pesticide?

By asking tough questions, you can begin to separate the real and false claims, becoming a more sophisticated green consumer.

What to look for in a meaningful label...

The best claims/labels are those that have been certified by an independent organization, like the USDA organic certification. These organizations use established criteria to verify that a product meets a set of meaningful and consistent standards for environmental protection and/or social justice. See Table 1 for a comparison of common “eco-labels.”



Table 1. A Comparison of Common “Eco-Labels.”

Label	Description	Synthetic pesticide use prohibited	Synthetic fertilizer use prohibited	Independent verification	Standards publicly available	Developed with public input
	Products follow National Organic Standards for growing and processing, implemented by U.S. Department of Agriculture in 2002	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
	Products grown with “BioIPM” practices	No <i>(Least-toxic encouraged)</i>	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
	Products come from farms deemed to use practices not harmful to salmon habitat. Urban campuses can also be certified for adhering to “salmon safe” landscape management practices	No <i>(list of prohibited substances, but may be waived)</i>	No	Yes	Yes	No
	Products tested for pesticide residues, but often the NutriClean allowable residues are no more stringent than the EPA’s allowable levels.	No	No	Yes	Yes	No
	Products grown using “environmentally responsible management practices” including integrated pest and disease management practices, soil and water conservation, fair labor treatment practices and good community relations	No <i>(list of prohibited pesticides)</i>	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
	Products must be grown or processed with fair working conditions, humane care of livestock, reduced pesticide use, soil and water conservation methods, and wildlife habitat protection	No <i>(list of prohibited pesticides)</i>	No	Yes	Yes	No
	Dairy products produced by cows that have very few restrictions. Pesticides, hormones, and antibiotics encourage to increase production	No <i>(pesticide use encouraged)</i>	No	No	Yes	No

Portions of the table above are adapted from Consumers Union’s Eco-Labels Center, www.greenerchoices.org/eco-labels.

Do your own research...

Investigate the toxicity and environmental effects of each ingredient and decide whether you think the product is environmentally sound. Keep in mind that a toxic material may have environmental impacts because of its production, transport, use and disposal. Also, label statements about toxicity generally refer only to acute or immediate toxicity, but say nothing of chronic or long-term effects like cancer, birth defects, sterility, miscarriage, or other permanent and debilitating effects.

Information on Common Marketing Claims

I. Environmentally Safe/ Environmentally Friendly/ Eco-Safe

There is currently no standard definition for these terms. There is no organization that certifies or verifies these claims and they can therefore offer little information of value. According to the FTC, these claims, or labels that contain environmental seals, are not very meaningful because (1) all products, packaging and services have some environmental impact, although some may have less than others; (2) these claims alone do not provide the specific information needed to compare products, packaging, or services on their environmental merits. The FTC recommends looking at labels that give some substance to the claim, like additional information that explains why the product is environmentally friendly or has earned a special seal.

II. Antibacterial

Used mostly on household products that claim to protect against bacteria and other microorganisms. Such claims are illegal unless the product is registered with the EPA, or are personal care products labeled in accordance with FDA labeling requirements. Check for an EPA registration number on the label. If, however, the claim only applies to protecting the product itself from dam-

age by bacteria and not to provide additional health benefits, it can be exempt from EPA's full review (a health protection claim on a pesticide product requires a review of product efficacy and additional safety reviews), but, clarifying statements must be placed on the label, for example, "This product contains a preservative (e.g., fungicide or insecticide) built-in or applied as a coating only to protect the product."

III. Organic

Organic farming does not permit the use of synthetic chemical pesticides and fertilizers, genetically engineered seeds, antibiotics, sewage sludge, irradiation and other practices. It also conserves natural resources by recycling natural materials and it encourages an abundance of species living in balanced, harmonious ecosystems. Like farming operations, processors must be certified. The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) set national standards for food and fibers labeled "organic," whether they are grown in the United States or imported from other countries. In order for an agricultural product to be labeled organic, an official USDA accredited certifier annually inspects the farm where the food or fiber is grown.

Processed food labeled organic may contain some portion of synthetic or chemically-grown ingredients (up to 5 percent) if their organically grown counterparts are not commercially available. The "USDA Organic" seal may be used only on products that are "100% organic," and "organic" (meaning 95-99% organic ingredients). Products labeled as "made with organic ingredients" must contain at least 70% organic ingredients and may display the certifier's logo but not the USDA organic logo.

Only products with a USDA Organic seal and those certified by an

Labor Practices

Some organizations, such as the Rainforest Alliance, have tried to incorporate growing and labor practices into their certification. Other certifications pertain only to growing practices, or only to labor practices. While the USDA organic certification is the most stringent certification for growing practices, it does not address labor issues beyond the fact that by its very nature, it eliminates the use of toxic pesticides that pose a great risk to farmworkers. A growing fair trade movement both internationally and domestically has developed standards for labor practices that address both compensation and working conditions for farmers and farmworkers. These standards include limitations on chemical use, but they do not require organic production.





Animal Welfare

Both agricultural and cosmetic products are under scrutiny for animal welfare practices. For agricultural standards, there are many claims such as “free-range,” “hormone-free,” and certifications such as Certified Humane Raised and Handled, and USDA Organic. For cosmetics, there are claims such as “cruelty-free” and certifications such as the Corporate Standard for Compassion for Animals. There are also labels such as Certified Vegan. Some of these labels, such as “cruelty-free” and “free-range” are practically meaningless and generally unverifiable (free-range simply means the animals have been allowed access to the outside at some point). Although some certifications provide an element of confidence about animal welfare, the best way to determine if a farm treats its animals in a humane way is to be acquainted with the farm—support local farms where you can see the farming practices. If you choose to eat meat, eggs and dairy products, these are generally products you can purchase locally year round, so it is worth developing a relationship with a local farmer. If you are concerned about the use of animal products (from manure to bloodmeal) on a farm, talk with the farmer, or look for a “veganic” farm.

official USDA accredited certifier are considered legitimate. Note that the meaning of USDA organic label is different for food than for cosmetics and personal care products.

IV. Natural and Hormone-Free

The “natural” claim is regulated by the USDA when it pertains to meat, but this label has nothing to do with meat production. It simply means that no artificial ingredients have been added to the meat itself. Hormone-free may also be used on a label according to USDA, provided that “sufficient” evidence documents that hormones were not given to the animals. This sufficient evidence does not require third-party verification.

VI. Biodegradable

The biodegradable claim, in some cases, can be misleading and the FTC took action in the early-mid 1990’s against several companies for making unsubstantiated, misleading, and/or deceptive biodegradable claims. It implies that the product will break down to natural materials within a reasonably short time after disposal. The label can have different meanings for different products/ingredients, and there is no organization that certifies or verifies this claim. The FTC’s *Guide for the Use of Environmental Marketing Claims* states that, “Claims of degradability, biodegradability or photodegradability should be qualified to the extent necessary to avoid consumer deception about: (1) the product or package’s ability to degrade in the environment where it is customarily disposed; and (2) the rate and extent of degradation.”

VII. Recycled

The recycled label is used for products that contain used, rebuilt, reconditioned, or remanufactured materials. The label must indicate how much of the product is recycled and the origin of the recycled content. Recycled material may be “post consumer” material, which refers to consumer waste e.g. newspaper, glass, plastic, or “pre-consumer” material, also known as manufacturing/industrial waste.

VIII. Safe/Non-toxic

The safe or non-toxic claim, and other similar statements, when used on pesticide products is false and misleading. Evaluation of all product ingredients is the only way to verify product toxicity. This is often difficult to do since product manufacturers are not required to disclose all their ingredients on product labels.

When it comes to pesticide products, claims as to the safety of the pesticide or its ingredients, including statements such as “safe,” “nonpoisonous,” “noninjurious,” “harmless” or “nontoxic to humans and pets” are also considered false and misleading under the *Federal Insecticide, Fungicide and Rodenticide Act* (FIFRA). Products bearing such claims are in violation of FIFRA guidelines.

For more information, visit:

- EPA: www.epa.gov/pesticides/label
- Consumer Reports: www.greenerchoices.org/home.cfm
- Federal Trade Commission: www.ftc.gov