

ORGANIC AND NATURAL MEAT PRODUCTS

Organic meat and poultry products are a small but growing category of products. Consumer demand for organic foods has grown steadily since the coining of the term by J.I. Rodale, a Pennsylvania farmer, in 1942. To meet that growing demand, manufacturers have developed and marketed organic products and retail markets specializing in organic products have developed and are thriving. According to the Organic Trade Association, the U.S. organic food market reached 35.9 billion by the end of 2014. Sales grew 11 percent in 2014. OTA reports that organic food now accounts for 5 percent of all food products sold in the U.S.

According to the US Department of Agriculture there are around 37.5 million organically raised cattle, pigs, sheep, chickens and other poultry being raised in the United States—that is less than 1 percent of the 9.2 million livestock and poultry raised in the U.S. USDA estimates that the value of retail sales of organic meat, poultry and fish—in 2014 was about \$1.14 billion. Retail sales increased by a factor of 4 between 2005-2014.

Standards and labeling regulations for farmers and producers to help market their products domestically and internationally went into effect in October 2002.

History of the Organic Standard

For years the term organic had been used loosely to describe a host of products derived from livestock and poultry raised in non-traditional or alternative ways. The Organic Foods Production Act of 1990 was adopted as part of the 1990 Farm Bill and set the stage for USDA to develop national standards for organically produced agricultural products from fruits and vegetables to dairy and meat products.

The bill resulted from a petition by the organic industry urging Congress to define “organic.” The Act gave USDA the authority to write a regulation explaining the criteria for organic foods to producers, handlers and certifiers. The National Organic Standards Board (NOSB) was assembled to help USDA write the regulation. The NOSB’s recommendations were the platform from which USDA launched its new organic standard.

The final organic standard rule was published on December 21, 2000, and was fully implemented by October 21, 2002.

Meat and Poultry Products

In order for meat and poultry products to carry the organic label, the products must meet the following criteria:

- Livestock must be fed 100 percent organically grown feed (grains) and forage (pastures).
- Synthetic hormones and vaccinations are prohibited.
- Synthetic pesticides on pastures are prohibited.
- The use of sewage sludge for fertilization and genetic engineering are prohibited.
- The use of irradiation is prohibited.

The rule details the methods, practices and substances that can be used in producing and handling organic crops and livestock and processed products. It also establishes clear organic labeling criteria.

All agricultural products labeled organic must originate from farms or handling operations certified by a state or private agency accredited by USDA, according to the rule. Farms and handling operations selling less than \$5,000 worth per year of organic agricultural products are exempt from certification.

Labels

Foods that meet USDA’s organic standard can be labeled in one of four categories:

- 100 percent organic
- Organic (at least 95 percent organic)
- Made with organic ingredients (at least 70 percent organic)
- Contains organic ingredients

Foods that are 100 or 95 percent organic have the option of displaying the green USDA Organic seal.

Organic v. Natural Meat

U.S. meat and poultry companies have marketed “natural” meat for 20 years. In 1982, USDA issued a policy memo stating that the term “natural” may be used to label meat products that do not contain artificial or synthetic ingredients, coloring additives, and are not more than minimally processed.

Minimal processing can include traditional processes used to make food edible, to preserve it or to make it safe for human consumption (smoking, roasting, freezing, drying and fermenting). Also permitted under the USDA Natural Standard are physical processes that do not fundamentally alter the raw product and/or that only separate whole, intact food into component parts (i.e., grinding meat). All products labeled as natural should include a brief statement explaining what qualifies the product as “natural.”

Meat and poultry companies produce more “natural” products than they do organic products.

NAMI Position

The meat and poultry industry is in the business of meeting consumer demand, including the demand for organic meat and poultry. Labels appearing on organic meat and poultry in grocery stores will help consumers who desire these products distinguish them from other products. USDA’s standard also helps ensure that the term “organic” is applied to products that meet a consistent set of criteria.

Americans are fortunate to have the safest, most abundant and most affordable food supply in the world. Organic meat and poultry are a small but growing part of that U.S. meat and poultry supply.

NAMI shares USDA’s view: organic meat and poultry products are equal in safety and quality to other products. NAMI also supports USDA’s prohibition on claims that organic products are in any way better than those produced by traditional methods. Uniform standards and labeling for organic meat and poultry will help market these products domestically and internationally.

HELPFUL LINKS

North American Meat Institute
www.meatinstitute.org
www.meatsafety.org

*United Kingdom Department
of Environment, Food and
Rural Affairs*
www.defra.gov.uk/

*World Organization for
Animal Health*
www.oie.int

USDA FMD Hotline
800-601-9327

*Animal and Plant Health
Inspection Service*
www.aphis.usda.gov