

Food Labels: “All-Natural” Products with Artificial Meaning

By Alec Snyder | December 17, 2015

Scanning the aisles and shelves of any supermarket, deli or convenience store, consumers are increasingly presented with and assured that products are “organic” or “all-natural.” But what does that really mean?

Confused? Well, you’re not alone. The Food and Drug Administration is wondering, too.

Under the United States Department of Agriculture’s (USDA) definitions for food packaging, terms such as “natural,” “all-natural,” and “made with natural ingredients” lack a true industry standard. Although the USDA and FDA have suggestions for what should define “natural” on food packaging, they do not monitor labels themselves much past whether or not food products are mislabeled in general.

“In the United States, neither the FDA nor the USDA has rules or regulations for products labeled ‘natural,’” says Jaclyn Bowen, General Manager of Quality Assurance International (QAI), a subsidiary of NSF International, an independent product testing lab. “As a result, food manufacturers often place a ‘natural’ label on foods containing heavily processed ingredients.”

That’s why since November 12, 2015, and through February 10, 2016, the FDA is conducting a public inquiry, asking people what they believe should be considered when defining “natural” food products on packaging.

However, the issue extends beyond the FDA. Even the general public, who the FDA is consulting, is often uninformed and misled. According to a 2014 Consumer Reports survey, one-third of those asked mistakenly believe that foods labeled as “natural” are actually “organic,” a sentiment that Registered Dietitian (RD) Leah Holbrook echoes.

“I think they [the general public] may think that the [natural] food is organic,” says Holbrook, also a Clinical Instructor of Family Medicine and Coordinator of Graduate Nutrition Programs at Stony Brook University of Medicine in Stony Brook, New York. “If they make an emotional choice or in response to marketing, that’s not as good as those made in fact.”

What further complicates this issue is that the presence of a “natural” label on foods also prompts consumers to purchase them, often for the wrong reasons.

“Market surveys show that health conscious consumers buy and trust food that prominently displays the word ‘natural’ on the front of the package, even though the ‘natural’ claim does not deliver any added health benefits above and beyond those of conventionally manufactured foods,” says Abigail Seiler of the Center for Food Safety (CFS), a national non-profit advocacy group promoting organic and sustainable agriculture. “In fact, some surveys have found that ‘natural’ has a broader public appeal than ‘organic,’ even though organic is a government-regulated label requiring farmers and food manufacturers to adhere to strict growing, processing, handling, and labeling practices.”

Truly organic foods are also increasing in market presence. The CFS reports that they comprise a \$29 billion industry and are increasing 15 to 20 percent on average each year. In addition, the CFS says that organic fruits and vegetables make up 12 percent of all U.S. fruit and vegetable sales.

Both Holbrook and Emily Moscato, an assistant professor in food marketing at St. Joseph’s University in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, say that the general public, especially higher-income families, is more likely to purchase organic food products when given the choice.

Moscato elaborates on a significant reason why this is the case.

“There’s this trust in transparency with the term that consumers are attracted to,” she says.

Perhaps more transparency in using the term “natural” could provide an increase in “natural” food sales as well.

One major development sparking further debate and discussion on the topic of “natural” foods is the FDA’s recent approval of genetically-modified AquAdvantage farmed salmon, also known as the “Frankenfish,” which grows at twice the rate of normally farmed salmon and are bred sterile. It is the first genetically modified organism (GMO) approved by the FDA for human consumption.

AquAdvantage declined an interview request.

Although the FDA is just getting started on approving GMO food products into the marketplace, the presence of GMOs in everyday food items is already substantial. According to the CFS, over 75 percent of processed foods in supermarkets contain genetically engineered ingredients.

Nevertheless, opinions on GMOs are polarized. In the farming community, some, such as farmer Joel Salatin, owner of Polyface Farms in Swoope, Virginia, have very strong feelings about the inclusion of GMOs in food production.

“GMOs are evil,” Salatin says. “We don’t use them.”

On the other hand, farmers such David Giusti, founder and owner of Second Spring Farm in Purcellville, Virginia, have a more ambivalent opinion about GMOs in general.

“I have no interest in using GMOs but I think that I’m not as against them entirely as some might expect,” Giusti says.

The role of GMOs in the food supply is a contentious topic itself, and how GMOs might fall under a “natural” foods definition is extremely controversial. An added difficulty is that by the USDA definition, organic foods cannot include GMOs and also must contain 95 to 100 percent organic ingredients. This means that, at most, only five percent of ingredients can be non-organic and non-GMO. However, such restrictions do not apply to “natural” foods yet.

Nonetheless, expert opinions tend to agree that, regardless of the inclusion of GMOs in food products, GMOs themselves should not be considered “natural.”

“Research finds that ‘natural’ means non-GMO, has limited processing, and ingredients that, for more of a layman’s terms, have no synthetic ingredients,” says Emily Moscato of St. Joseph’s University.

“I don’t think a GMO should be allowed to be labeled as ‘natural,’” says Holbrook, also of St. Joseph’s. “Probably not as organic, either, because it’s too misleading to the consumers, so they should be labeled as GMO, which they’re not currently, though other countries do.”

According to the CFS, more than 90 percent of Americans in most polls believe that GMO foods should be labeled, while a Mellman Group poll showed that 77 percent were in favor, including politicians on both sides of the aisle.

It’s worth considering whether the general public is the proper audience to ask for input on narrowing a “natural” foods definition. However, Martelle Esposito, a part-time faculty member at the George Washington University in Washington, DC, as well as Government Affairs Manager and CDC Community Partnerships Grant Director, says the public’s role is important in this process.

“Likely they [the FDA] will issue a proposed rule after and will ask for public comment,” Esposito says. “Then the FDA must respond to each comment by either including the

suggestions in the final rule or justifying why they decided to not include it. Sometimes there is an interim final rule with another round of comments before the final rule. It is a very transparent, democratic process.”

Moscato agrees and also provides some perspective on when and how results from this inquiry may affect food labeling practices in the future.

“The FDA needs to consult the public and see what their stance is,” Moscato says. “What the results will be is very unclear. I see a couple of different directions, but all in all, it’s a step in the right direction since there’s a need. I want to see if they come to any result on the finding and come to a consensus moving forward.

“It’s probably a couple years out, if that,” she says. “Things don’t move fast.”