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Jose G. Peña

Professor & Extension
Economist-Management
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Voluntary Standard for Grass (Forage) Fed Livestock Diet Must Be Solely from Grasses, Forbs, Browse or Pre-grain Crops

Jose G. Peña, Professor and Extension Economist-Management

After more than two years to develop, review, obtain comments and make changes, the USDA-Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS) is establishing a voluntary standard for a grass (forage) fed, livestock marketing claim, effective November 15, 2007.

Consumer demand for grass-fed, natural, and organic livestock products is increasing rapidly. Special segments of the food industry are evolving to satisfy this demand. Consumer advocates of grass (forage) fed beef contend that the common practice of fattening livestock on a diet consisting largely of corn for more than 100 days before slaughter is unnatural for the animal and leads to fatty, less healthful meat. The grass fed standard is different from beef labeled organic, which requires adherence to a long list of other regulations. Beef can be labeled organic without being grass-fed, vice versa or both.

This voluntary program will allow participating livestock or meat producers to market USDA Process Verified products which were produced following specific practices so that livestock/meat may be differentiated in the marketplace as grass (forage) fed. USDA-AMS posted this grass (forage) fed livestock marketing claim standard in Vol. 72, No. 199 of the Federal Register on Tuesday, October 16, 2007. The standard was posted after reviewing/considering 19,811 comments concerning the grass (forage) fed claim from

consumers, academia, trade/professional associations, non-profit organizations, national organic associations, consumer advocacy associations, retail and meat product companies, and livestock producers. While a vast majority of the comments expressed concern over the potential nutritional feasibility of a grass (forage) only diet, USDA-AMS noted that this is a marketing claim centered on a production method where the animal's diet is derived from grass and not from a scientifically balanced, mixed diet.

Grass (Forage) Fed Standard

According to the USDA-AMS, grass and forage shall be the feed source consumed for the lifetime of the ruminant animal, with the exception of milk consumed prior to weaning. The diet shall be derived solely from forage consisting of grass (annual and perennial), forbs (e.g., legumes, Brassica), browse, or cereal grain crops in the vegetative (pre-grain) state. Animals cannot be fed grain or grain byproducts and must have continuous access to pasture during the growing season. Hay, haylage, baleage, silage, crop residue without grain, and other roughage sources may be included as acceptable feed sources. Routine mineral and vitamin supplementation may also be included in the feeding regimen. If incidental supplementation occurs due to inadvertent exposure to non-forage feedstuffs or to ensure the animal's well being at all times during adverse environmental or physical conditions, the producer must fully document (e.g., receipts, ingredients, and tear tags) the supplementation that occurs including the amount, the frequency, and the supplements provided.

Livestock and meat producers (individuals and companies) may request the voluntary services of AMS to verify or certify specific practices to increase the value of their products. The validity of such claims would probably be enhanced since the product would be labeled as "USDA Certified." AMS offers verification services through Quality System Verification

Programs (QSVP; <http://www.ams.usda.gov/lsg/arc/audit.htm>)

Upon request, verification of this Grass (Forage) Fed Standard claim will be accomplished through an audit of the production process. The producer must be able to verify for AMS that the grass (forage) marketing claim standard requirements are being met through a detailed documented quality management system.

Product labels that include the grass (forage) fed marketing claim must be submitted to USDA's Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS), Labeling Program and Delivery Division (LPDD), for evaluation prior to use.

According to the USDA-AMS standard, while producers and handlers may use an approved grass (forage) fed label without participating in a USDA-Quality System Verification Program (QSVP), the use of any official certificate, memoranda, marks, or other identifications, and devices without complying with the Agricultural Marketing Act program requirements, may result in either a fine, imprisonment or both.