



Naturally Confusing

By now you should know more than you ever wanted to about labelling — what must be on the label, what can't be on a label, and what you might want to put on a label put can't depending on your product. In recent years, understanding Canadian labelling requirements has become a necessity for producers. And there's still more work to be done, as regulators begin tackling the remaining on-packaging marketing.

After legislating such issues as trans fat and organic labelling, on-package health claims are now in the government's crosshairs. Last fall, for example, Health Canada started the consultation process on its program *Blueprint for Renewal: Transforming Canada's Approach to Regulating Health Products and Food*. Although there is as of yet no timetable for completion, Health Canada is indicating that parameters for health claims will be critiqued.

Hopefully one area that will be reviewed will be the current definition of natural, a word that is often misused on packaging. The last few years have seen an increasing demand by consumers for "natural" foods. There seems to be an inherent belief that foods labelled as natural are in some way higher quality and better for you, and consumers are generally willing to pay more for what they perceive as a premium product. But if you ask what "natural" really means, the answer will likely differ depending on who you ask.

To many consumers, natural means no additives or preservatives, artificial colours or flavours. Grains are grown without the use of pesticides, or in the case of meat, animals are raised without the use of growth hormones, antibiotics or supplements in their diet. Or is that organic? What about animals raised in a free-range environment? Does that make it a natural product? Again, it's something consumers probably don't know how to identify, or even quantify. In fact, a poll conducted recently through *Food in Canada's* monthly newsletter asked readers: "Do you believe that the average Canadian consumer is aware of or understands the Canadian Food Inspection Agency's (CFIA) definition of natural?" Not surprisingly, an overwhelming 98 per cent of our readers said "No."

For the record, the CFIA says under section 4.7 of the

2003 Guide to Food Labelling and Advertising that "Foods or ingredients of foods submitted to processes that have significantly altered their original physical, chemical or biological state should not be described as 'natural.' A natural food or ingredient of a food is not expected to contain, or ever have contained, an added vitamin, mineral nutrient, artificial flavouring agent or food additive." It goes on to say that food additives, vitamins and mineral nutrients from natural sources are acceptable to label as "natural ingredients." The issue becomes cloudy for the average consumer when they raise questions about GMOs, cloning, farming practices and even fair trade. And what about the use of natural ingredients such as potassium lactate or naturally occurring microbials as preservatives? Do consumers know enough to understand that they are "natural?"

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South of the border, producers believe it's time to widen the definition of natural and ensure that it addresses these kinds of questions. In December, as a result of a petition by Hormel Foods, members of the meat industry had the opportunity to speak to the U.S. Food and Drug Administration's (FDA) Food Safety and Inspection Service at a hearing regarding

the definition of the word "natural." Many meat producers are concerned that "natural" currently refers only to a post-slaughter processing application, and does not take into account farming methods, medication or diet. This hearing also follows the U.S. Sugar Association's petition to the FDA last spring asking it to more specifically define "natural" and "all-natural" statements on packaging due to increasingly misleading claims and consumer confusion.

This issue is not likely to go away anytime soon. The 2005 Ipsos Reid *Natural Health Products Survey* found that "virtually all Canadians (97 per cent) are aware of natural health products," and that "76 per cent of Canadians purchased natural health products...in 2005." As the demand for natural foods and ingredients continues to expand, consumers will expect to see more information on the package, enabling them to make the most informed purchasing decision possible. In order to properly sell to this sector, it's time producers had a more definitive and comprehensive way of defining the market.

carolyn.cooper@food.rogers.com