

GUIDE TO FOOD LABELS & CERTIFICATIONS

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Research shows that many consumers are misled or confused by food labels and certifications due to greenwashing marketing or lack of information. Consumers are also unsure what the labels represent, with prior knowledge of environmental and social impacts necessary for the labels to make sense. When grocery shopping, most consumers do not spend enough time looking at the labels to understand their intentions. They either know what the label stands for and make a decision based on that or will look past the label due to other factors like brand loyalty, price, time or lack of knowledge. Research in the winter quarter of 2023 was conducted to better understand how consumers interpret and understand food labels.

Empirical studies and literature were identified and reviewed using Google Scholar, EBSCO, ScienceDirect, and Seattle University's Academic Search Engine. Only articles that discuss the mentioned labels were included in the research; articles that focused on nutritional labels only were not reviewed. The following keywords were used in various combinations when conducting research: consumers, motivations, food, labels, U.S., impact, certification, environment, sustainability, public health, empirical, USDA.

From the research, findings show that consumers do not fully understand what each label represents as well as the social and environmental impact associated with particular labels/certifications. Because of the lack of information and consumer confusion with food labels, this guide was created to be a resource for consumers, specifically Seattle U students, to better understand what various the labels/certifications mean. The labels included in the guide were chosen based on the research and affiliation with Seattle University. Seattle U's Laudato Si goals on purchasing certified foods and the STARS report were considered as well when determining what labels to include. The Redhawk Dining's climate label was also included. Information about the labels certification process, who certifies the label, and the environmental and social impact is shared throughout the guide. Seattle U's climate label and association with some of the external labels are included as well. There is also information provided to access websites about the labels.

This guide was created as part of a senior capstone project in the Communications department at Seattle University by Ashley Hagar, communications and environmental studies student in the class of 2023.

GUIDE TO FOOD LABELS & CERTIFICATIONS

USDA ORGANIC



- Ingredients/products are produced in compliance with the National List of allowed substances
- Exclude genetically modifying or using sewage sludge, and must maintain ecological balance and promote soil and water quality
- Crops, livestock, feed, processed and fiber products

RAINFOREST ALLIANCE



- Standards across four themes: forests, human rights, climate, and livelihoods
- Production practices prevent deforestation, promote healthy soil and waterways, and provides safe working conditions.

CERTIFIED SUSTAINABLE SEAFOOD



- Applies to fisheries that have been certified by the MSC Fisheries Standard (protect biodiversity)
- Goal is to end overfishing and provide sustainably caught fish to consumers
- Cannot be used for individuals or vessels, only fishing operations or a vessel, individual or fleet using certain gear types.

FAIRTRADE & FAIR TRADE USA



- Ingredients or products must be fully traceable, produced sustainably, and provide livable and safe working conditions
- Seattle University is a fair trade designated campus
- International or country certifications

FOOD ALLIANCE CERTIFIED



- Crops, livestock, shellfish, beverages, packaging, nurseries/greenhouses, hemp and cannabis
- Based on safe working conditions, humane animal treatment, soil and water health, biodiversity, and use of ecosystem-based approaches for pest management
- No GMOs or toxic pesticides

SEATTLE U CLIMATE LABEL



- Redhawk Dining scales food products based on environmental and social impact
- Based on greenhouse gas emissions, soil biodiversity, water and land usage and labor conditions

CAGE FREE EGGS



- Hens live in facilities with no access to outdoors; they are in an enclosed area, but not cages
- Have unlimited access to food and water
- Must be able to roam around the area during their laying cycle

NON-GMO PROJECT VERIFIED



- Crops, animal products, seeds, or products for human use
- Contain no (or less than 0.9 percent) GMOs
- For animal products, the animal was not genetically engineered and that the animal feed contains less than 5% GMO material

CERTIFIED NATURALLY GROWN



- No GMOs or synthetic pesticides are used during production and requires crop rotation.
- Applies to crops, livestock, apiary, mushrooms and aquaponics.

CERTIFIED HUMANE



- Ethical livestock production where the livestock can engage in natural behavior at any time
- Standards in place for cattle, turkeys, hens, and pigs

FREE RANGE EGGS



- Hens have to the outdoor environment during their laying cycle
- Have unlimited access to food, water and the outdoors
- Are not kept inside or in a cage/stall during their laying cycles

Scan the QR code to access a complete guide with more information about each of the food labels.

SEATTLE UNIVERSITY'S CLIMATE LABEL

Seattle University's Redhawk Dining introduced its very own 'climate' label to its dining halls during the 2022-2023 academic year. The label developed from the partnership between Chartwells, Seattle U's dining provider, and HowGood, a research company with a database on product sustainability.

The university uses a scale of four labels to demonstrate the environmental and social impact of the food product to the students. HowGood reviewed Redhawk Dining menus to determine the status of each item. The labels are based on different sustainability factors: greenhouse gas emissions, water usage, soil biodiversity, land usage, and labor conditions.



GOOD

The 'good' level represents more than the item or recipe has a social & environmental impact that is better than **75%** of other products.



GREAT

The 'great' level represents more than the item or recipe has a social & environmental impact that is better than **85%** of other products.



BEST

The 'best' level represents more than the item or recipe has a social & environmental impact that is better than **95%** of other products.



CLIMATE FRIENDLY

The Climate Friendly label recognizes food products with **greenhouse gas emissions lower than 70%**.

Environmental Impact:

The USDA organic certification ensures that products are promoting ecological balance, water quality, biodiversity and soil health.

To be an organic certified product, production must occur without genetic engineering, sewage sludge, chemical pesticides, antibiotics or growth hormones, fertilizers with synthetic ingredients, or ionizing radiation. They must also be produced in compliance with the national list of allowed substances.

Social Impact:

Some small farmers cannot afford to spend money on organic certification, even if their products are organically produced. Because of the USDA's regulations, they can't label their products as "organic" either. Many small farms opt to sell locally or at farmers markets to avoid certification processes.

USDA ORGANIC



The organic label is accredited by the US Department of Agriculture's certifying agents. The USDA controls how the organic seal or the word "organic" can be used in retail sales. The regulations control organic food, feed and fiber products. There are four specific categories within the USDA regulations: crops, livestock, wild crops, and processed products.

The USDA organic certification helps maintain environmental health, but also can cause challenges for small farmers.

More Information:

For more specifics about the USDA organic seal, visit the [USDA's website](#).

Four Levels of Organic:

The USDA has developed four levels of organic labeling all of which must be USDA certified.

"100 Percent Organic"

This certification may use the organic seal and ensures that 100% organic ingredients and processing are used.

"Organic"

This certification means that at least 95% of the product is made up of organic ingredients. The other 5% can be nonorganic products. Products can use the organic seal.

"Made with Organic..."

Products must contain at least 70% organic ingredients. The rest of the product must comply with USDA constraints on nonorganic and the organic seal cannot be used.

"Specific Organic Ingredients"

Contains less than 70% certified organic ingredients; product can list the certified organic ingredients as organic in the ingredient list. Seal cannot be used.

NON-GMO PROJECT VERIFIED

The Non-GMO Project's product verification program allows for the "Verified" label to be put on product packaging. Seeds, crops, animal products, and products for human use that are for sale are eligible for certification.

The Standard

Products certified by the Non-GMO Project are processed in compliance with the project's standard. The standard ensures that any product with this certification contain no (or less than 0.9 percent) GMOs. When the label is on animal products, the seal ensures that the animal was not genetically engineered and that the animal feed contains less than 5% GMO material.

More Information:

For more specifics about this label, visit the [Non-GMO Project's website](http://nongmoproject.org).

GMO Concerns

Genetically engineering/modifying products, crops, seeds or livestock can create concerns for farmers as wind can carry seeds into other fields for pollination as well as the unknown associated with reproducing GMOs. There are also concerns surrounding toxicity to the environment, antibiotic resistance, and loss of nutrition. To mitigate these concerns, the Non-GMO Project checks for GMO contamination, such as corn and soy products or feed, at various points in the production process, from farm to shelf.



RAINFOREST ALLIANCE

The Rainforest Alliance certification comes from a non-governmental organization, the Rainforest Alliance, that ensures a product or ingredient is produced using sustainable methods. Methods include production practices that prevent deforestation, promote healthy soil and waterways, and provides safe working conditions.

This certification meets standards across four themes: forests, human rights, climate, and livelihoods.

More Information:

For more specifics about this certification, visit the [Rainforest Alliance's website](http://rainforestalliance.org).



CERTIFIED NATURALLY GROWN

A third-party, nonprofit organization regulates the standards of the Certified Naturally Grown seal. This label has similar standards to the USDA Organic seal: no GMOs or synthetic pesticides, and required crop rotation. This label applies to crops, livestock, apiary, mushrooms and aquaponics. The CNG label is more accessible to small-scale farms that cannot afford the USDA certification as it requires less paperwork and is certified through a peer-review inspection process.

More Information:

For more specifics about the CNG label, visit the [nonprofit's website](#).

FAIR TRADE

Fair trade products can be certified internationally by FAIRTRADE or by Fair Trade USA in the U.S.. To be certified, these products must be fully traceable from farm to shelf, produced sustainably, and workers receive livable wages and safe working conditions. Fair trade ensures that products are grown, harvested, crafted and traded using methods that protect the environment and improve lives.

Products with the fair trade certification can be a processed product or an individual ingredients. Allowing both types of products to be certified, more opportunities are created for farmers to sell their commodities.



Seattle University is a designated Fair Trade University, earning the title in 2015. Fair trade products like bananas, coffee and tea are sold across campus.

FAIRTRADE

The international certification has different marks on the label that represent different sourcing methods. The original label means the product is fully traceable, while the label with an arrow informs the consumer to learn about a specific ingredient's sourcing on the back of the package (minimum fairtrade content is 20%).

Fair Trade USA

Fair Trade USA does not cover as many categories of products as the international certification.

More Information:

For more specifics about fair trade certifications, visit [FAIRTRADE's website](#).

CERTIFIED HUMANE



The Certified Humane label comes from a third-party nonprofit organization dedicated to ethical livestock production where the livestock can engage in natural behavior at any time. There are standards in place for cattle, turkeys, hens, and pigs.

All livestock must have continuous access to shade and protection, water, nutritious feed without antibiotics and trained caregivers.

More Information:

For more specifics about the Certified Human label, visit the [nonprofit organization's website](#).

Cattle

Cattle must have continuous access to outdoors and access to a lying area with dry bedding to allow for normal resting behavior.

Pigs

Access to a lying area with dry bedding is necessary for pigs at all times to allow for them to lie down. Continuous access to straw or other materials for chewing, pawing and rooting behaviors to occur as normal.

Turkeys

Turkeys require perches for roosting and engaging in natural behaviors as well as a minimum of eight hours of light and eight hours or darkness everyday for natural life cycle maintenance.

Hens

Perches for roosting and engaging in natural behavior must be available at all times as well as space move around freely without difficulty.



CERTIFIED SUSTAINABLE SEAFOOD

The Marine Stewardship Council's (MSC) blue label is applied to seafood from fisheries that have been certified by the MSC Fisheries Standard. The label works to end overfishing and provide sustainably caught fish to consumers that comes from fisheries that protect biodiversity and ocean health.

The MSC certification cannot be used for individuals or vessels, rather fishing operations or a vessel, fleet or individual using certain gear types.

More Information:

For more specifics about the MSC label, visit the [Marine Stewardship Council's website](#).

EGGS: CAGE FREE VS. FREE RANGE

The free range and cage free labels on egg packaging refer to what the housing environment was like for the hens during their laying cycle. The USDA is in charge of determining how eggs are labeled, but there are not specific seals used on packaging after certification.

CAGE FREE

Eggs labels cage free refers to hens that were living in facilities with no access to outdoors. Cage free means the hens are housing in an enclosed area or room. The area must allow for the layers to have unlimited access to food and water. The hens must be able to roam around the area during their laying cycle and are not kept in any form of cages or stalls.



FREE RANGE

Free range eggs refers to the access hens have to the outdoor environment during their laying cycle, unlike cage free hens. During their laying cycle, the hens must have unlimited access to food, water and the outdoors. These layers are not kept inside or in a cage/stall during their laying cycles. The USDA is in charge of regulating these requirements.



FOOD ALLIANCE

The Food Alliance Certified label comes from a nonprofit organization has a wider environmental scope than the USDA organic label. The label can be used for crops, livestock, shellfish, beverages, nurseries, cannabis, hemp and packaging systems. Food Alliance certified producers cannot use GMOs or synthetic pesticides and they must provide safe working conditions, humane animal treatment, conserve and protect soil, water and biodiversity, and use ecosystem-based approaches for pest management.

More Information:

For more specifics about the label, visit the [Food Alliance's website](#).