

The New York Times

April 21, 2010

Buying Green Feels Good. But Does It Do Any Good?

By THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

Filed at 1:35 p.m. ET

NEW YORK (AP) -- Does it matter if your makeup is 100 percent [vegan](#)?

The growing lexicon of eco-friendly product descriptions may have you wondering what they all mean. Even if you feel better about buying a product that sports an Earth logo, you may be fuzzy on what benefits it brings.

"There's a lot of green noise in the marketplace of labels. It really muddies it up for the labels that are actually meaningful," said Urvashi Rangan, director of [Consumers Union's GreenerChoices.org](#).

Environmental marketing claims have become so pervasive that the Federal Trade Commission is reviewing its green marketing guide for businesses, a year earlier than planned.

For now, the agency suggests consumers be wary of vague terms like "environmentally friendly" or "better for the Earth" that are short on specifics. Still, it's easy to assume such labels denote superior health or environmental perks.

To honor [Earth Day](#), a cheat sheet on five terms that often provoke confusion.

BIODEGRADABLE

This means the materials in a product will break down and degrade back into nature within a reasonably short time after disposal.

No formal verification is required for products to carry the label, and it's up to companies to back up their claims. It also may not be clear whether the description applies to the packaging or the contents, said Laura Koss, a senior attorney at the FTC.

Some products, such as shampoos or detergents, have always been biodegradable, yet may now be trumpeted as biodegradable as a marketing tactic.

Even if a product is biodegradable, the process may not occur as quickly as expected. That's because trash often ends up in landfills, where degradation occurs very slowly due to a lack of sunlight and moisture.

There are more specific labels. For example, the "certified biodegradable" label for soaps, detergents and cleaners signifies a much more specific standard, but its use is still very limited. Issued by the Scientific Certification System, it means 70 percent of a product will degrade within 28 days. It also means any remaining product is not toxic to fish and other sea life?

CERTIFIED HUMANE RAISED & HANDLED

You might spot this label on eggs, dairy or meat products. It's administered by Humane Farm Animal Care, a Virginia-based nonprofit, and requires that specific living conditions were provided for animals.

With beef cattle, for example, there are requirements on what the animals are fed and how they're housed and slaughtered. They also can't be given any growth hormones, and must have constant access to a space where they're able to lie in a normal resting posture.

By contrast, the term "free-range" has no uniform meaning, said Rangan of Consumers Union. As idyllic as the term sounds, it could simply mean chickens are given access to an open space for a few minutes each day.

Meanwhile, another animal-friendly term -- vegan -- has jumped beyond the food aisles and is being used for personal care and cleaning products. It might be important if you're a vegan and looking to avoid cosmetics that sometimes contain animal products.

HYPOALLERGENIC

This scientific-sounding label is popular in the skin care industry, but there's no industry standard on what it signifies.

In general, it's taken to mean the product doesn't contain chemicals that could cause irritation or an allergic reaction. But considering how varied and personal allergies are, such a broad claim may not carry much weight for your situation.

Of course, there may be specific reasons a company deems its product hypoallergenic; it may have tested for reactions to certain ingredients. But to learn such specifics, you'd likely have to call the company to ask.

NATURAL

Despite its wholesome glow, this now ubiquitous word means very little.

For example, a natural product can contain any ingredient or chemical. And the [U.S. Department of Agriculture](#) warns against confusing natural with organic; the latter comes with specific standards and certifications.

"Natural can mean whatever a company wants it to mean," Rangan said. There is one exception when the label carries a specific meaning. Under USDA rules, any meat marked as natural can't be injected with anything artificial before it's packaged. However, the label has no bearing on what an animal was fed before it was slaughtered.

ORGANIC

Most shoppers by now understand that the term organic means produce is free of the most common pesticides. For meat, poultry, eggs and dairy products, the familiar green-and-white circle means animals weren't given antibiotics or growth hormones. The standards are clearly defined and require certification.

Another food you'll commonly see labeled as organic is seafood. Consumers should be aware that there are no national standards for organic seafood, however. So if you come across organic salmon at the supermarket, there's no guarantee on what that label means. The growing awareness about the certain types of fish being depleted because of overconsumption also complicates matters. To find out which species are in danger, you can go to the websites of the Blue Ocean Institute or Oceana (www.blueocean.org, www.oceana.org) for guides on making sustainable choices. The sites even provide free pocket guides you can carry around if you're so inclined.
