

By Dave Carter

The USDA's Agricultural Marketing Service surprised nearly everyone in January by announcing it was withdrawing its grassfed standard which requires that products labeled as USDA grassfed be sourced from animals that were raised exclusively on a diet of grass, forbs (plants like alfalfa), browse (shrubs), or cereal grain crops without the seed heads.

That definition was developed in 2007, after extensive public comment, and announced with great fanfare. It drew sharp criticism from many grassfed producers at the time because it didn't contain any restrictions on confined feeding. Cattle from a feedlot could be marketed as grassfed as long as they were fed a diet that complied with the USDA definition.

Groups like the American Grassfed Association began to develop their own certification programs that used the USDA definition as a baseline, but also required grassfed animals to be raised in pastures.

Demand for grassfed meat has steadily been growing. Criticism of the USDA standard diminished.

So, what happened?

Understanding the logic behind this latest decision requires a little knowledge of the roles of various USDA agencies. On one hand, there is the USDA Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS). This agency—in cooperation with the Food and Drug Administration (part of the Department of Health and Human Services)—regulates the claims that can be put on meat labels. On the other hand, the Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS) is an agency that regulates voluntary programs that producers use to verify that they meet the claims that the FSIS allows to be used on labels.

Apparently someone from the Agricultural Marketing Service woke up one night with the realization that the agency doesn't have the authority to tell the Food Safety and Inspection Service what can—and cannot—be put on meat labels. Or something like that.

But wait, AMS administers the National Organic Program, which has the final say over any use of the word "organic" on food labels. Why is that different? As the AMS explained in its January announcement, Congress mandated the development of a voluntary organic labeling program. Nothing similar occurred with the grassfed label.

So, here we are. The American Grassfed Association and other groups that complained about the deficiencies in the USDA's grassfed label claim are now hitting the roof over its withdrawal.

That is because—like it or not—the AMS language provided a foundation for grassfed labeling. Now that foundation is gone.

Some voices claim that nothing will really change with this new announcement. I disagree.

Without the previous definition as a foundation, companies will likely file applications for label approval based on a variety of protocols. After all, isn't an animal grassfed if it spends 80 percent of its life on pasture, and only 20 percent fed a diet with grain?

American Grassfed and other groups that have pioneered this label claim will have an added burden moving forward in maintaining consumer trust. So, too, will the retailers who put the products in their meat case carrying any grassfed label.