

SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURE COALITION

For Immediate Release
April 3, 2003

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COALITION APPLAUDS USDA DECISION TO WITHDRAW MEAT LABEL CLAIMS

The Sustainable Agriculture Coalition today commended USDA's Agricultural Marketing Service for its decision to withdraw five proposed meat marketing label claims from the rulemaking process in order to allow for more time to review and solicit input from farmers affected by the claims. The production standards withdrawn from the process are grass-fed, free-range, and breed claims, as well as standards that address livestock raised without antibiotics or supplemental hormones.

"USDA's Agricultural Marketing Service has chosen to go back to the drawing board on the writing of these labeling standards. Their decision is in response to a flood of concern from farmers and consumers that the standards as written would mislead consumers and undercut the market for value-added meat products developed by innovative family farmers and ranchers," said Ann Wright, Senior Policy Associate with the Coalition.

The deadline for public comments was March 31st. During the open comment period thousands of producers and consumers registered concerns about the claims.

In a letter delivered to AMS on March 18, the Coalition joined with 10 other groups -- including Organic Valley Family of Farms, Consumer Federation of America, Union of Concerned Scientists, The Humane Society of the United States, and Keep Antibiotics Working: The Campaign to End Antibiotic Overuse -- to urge USDA to postpone finalizing controversial meat marketing standards. The letter asked for a more extensive and inclusive process that would allow input from family farm, consumer, humane, and environmental organizations and from sustainable livestock producers themselves, especially those who have worked hard to establish markets related to these label claims.

"Family farmers and ranchers who raise livestock using sustainable methods and their growing base of consumers want a role in establishing the labeling claims that directly affect their livelihoods and consumer preferences," said Wright. "We cannot allow these markets to be manipulated by the conventional meat industry and we therefore look forward to working with AMS to ensure that all voices are heard."

"The original proposal, now withdrawn, would have confused consumers and farmers alike," added Wright. "Livestock fed grain could have been marketed as grass-fed and meat from animals routinely fed antibiotics could have borne labels suggesting the opposite. Consumer and producer interest and confidence in these markets are growing and any USDA standard for a label claim must ensure the integrity of the label."

The Coalition represents farm, rural, and conservation organizations that advocate public policies supporting the long-term economic, social, and environmental sustainability of agriculture, natural resources and rural communities.

The AMS announcement - "USDA to Seek Additional Input on Specific Livestock and Meat Marketing Claims Standards" - can be found at www.ams.usda.gov/news/079-03.htm.