



Claims with No Content: How “Humanely Raised” Labels Fail Consumers and Animals



Table of Contents

3	Executive Summary
5	Key Takeaways
6	“Humanely Raised” Remains Undefined and Unenforceable
8	Many “Humane” Claims Cannot Be Verified
9	When Companies Define “Humane” Themselves, the Definitions Don’t Hold Up to Scrutiny
11	Certification Does Not Necessarily Mean Meaningful Welfare Standards
14	Chicken Exemplifies the Gap between Humane Claims and Reality
16	Conclusion
17	Policy Recommendations
18	Appendix
18	Methods
19	Sample Selection
19	Data Collection and Certification Assessment
19	Assessment of Producer-Defined Claims
19	Limitations
21	Author & Acknowledgements

ISSUE BRIEF

Executive Summary

For decades, the meat industry has worked overtime to persuade consumers that the animals who end up on their plates are not the products of factory farming. Its most effective tool in that endeavor is humanewashing: misleading marketing and language, often built around nice-sounding labels that create the impression that the animal lived a better life, without requiring any change in how animals are raised. Few labels are more successful at this than “humanely raised.” The label appears on meat and poultry products at most grocery stores in America.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) has authority over many claims that appear on meat labels. When a package says “humanely raised,” “raised with care,” “no antibiotics ever,” or “all natural,” it is because USDA has approved the use of the claim through an established regulatory framework. For years, USDA set no standards for what meat producers needed to do differently to use the “humanely raised” label.

Then in 2024, after more than a decade of pressure from advocacy groups including Farm Forward, USDA revised its guidelines governing animal-raising claims. At the time, Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack said the update would help level the playing field for producers and ensure consumers could trust these claims when purchasing meat. But the end result was a disappointment: the agency’s updated guidelines continued to allow producers to self-define humane treatment in more or less any way they desire. The updated guidelines also failed

to require third-party certification. Most damningly, they never established what even a minimal baseline standard of animal care would look like to qualify as higher welfare.

This is not simply a market failure; rather, it is the predictable result of a regulatory choice. USDA has the authority and the established process to set a real standard for “humanely raised” claims, but has chosen not to. The result is a system in which producers can take advantage of regulatory ambiguity by using vague or unverifiable claims to market products that may be no different from conventional meat. The regulatory structure that permits this outcome has little built-in pressure to change. This matters because the underlying reality has *not* changed: well over 90 percent of farmed animals are raised on factory farms.

In our web-based convenience sample of more than 60 meat and poultry product lines carrying “humane” claims across beef, pork, poultry, and lamb, we found that the majority (55 percent) did not have an independent, third-party certification on the product label, leaving shoppers with no clear way to verify the “humane” claims being made. Often, that term wasn’t worth much: many companies in our sample defined “humanely raised” in terms of animal feed, a factor that has nothing to do with confinement, handling, genetics, disease, or anything else that might actually influence the animal’s experience. Others used reassuring-sounding but meaningless language like “stress-free environment,” which is not tied to any verifiable practice or policy.



Photo: Jo-Anne McArthur / We Animals

Only 45 percent of our sample carried a third-party certification that a shopper could observe directly on the package. Although third-party certification can be important, it does not guarantee a humane environment. Among the minority of products that were certified, the most common label was USDA Organic, a program with only modest welfare requirements. Meanwhile, not a single product in our sample carried Animal Welfare Approved (AWA), one of the few certifications on the market with standards meeting or exceeding consumer expectations: it specifically requires that animals live their lives on pasture, with no cages or crates, and no factory farms. The absence of AWA-certified meat in our sample highlights the reality that shoppers simply can’t find animal products at most retailers that meet their ethical standards.

The limits of humane labeling become clearest when labels omit the factors that most shape an animal’s quality of life. This omission is especially

consequential for chickens raised for meat, whose growth has been accelerated, whose bodies have been enlarged, and whose susceptibility to disease has increased through decades of selective breeding. More than 95 percent of chicken meat sold at retail, including nearly all carrying a “humane” label, comes from genetically modified birds whose growth rate has increased by more than 400 percent since 1957. **These birds are destined to experience higher rates of lameness, cardiovascular distress, early death, and myriad other conditions of suffering and illness.**

Genetically healthier birds do exist, but they are exceptionally rare. Whether marketed as conventional, cage-free, organic, or humane, nearly all chickens raised for meat are derived from the same fast-growing genetic lines that make certain forms of suffering an *inherent feature of production* rather than a consequence of individual farming practices.

The evidence supports the following conclusion: two years after its update, USDA’s labeling framework has done nothing to prevent “humanely raised” from functioning primarily as a misleading marketing claim rather than a substantive welfare standard. Many products carrying the label cannot be verified, and when they can, verification often means little. And when it comes to the most important question that determines whether a chicken’s life is bearable—their genetics—the label has nothing to say.

To address these failures, USDA must establish species-specific minimum standards; it must require, rather than merely encourage, third-party certification for animal claims; and it must ensure that claims of humane treatment address the factors that actually determine an animal’s welfare, including genetics and growth rate.

Key Takeaways

- 1. “Humanely Raised” remains undefined and unenforceable.** USDA’s 2024 update left the core problem untouched. Producers are still able to write their own definitions, no species-specific minimum standards exist, and third-party certification is *encouraged* rather than *required*.
- 2. Many “humane” claims cannot be verified.** Only 45 percent of the humane-labeled products we reviewed carried independent, on-label certification, while a majority did not. Shoppers, at the point of purchase, have no way to know what these claims actually mean for animals, if anything.
- 3. When companies define “humane” themselves, the definitions don’t hold up to scrutiny.** Many producer-written definitions focused narrowly on housing or feed, or relied on vague “stress-free” language. These approaches provide little meaningful information about whether an animal lived a good life.
- 4. Certification does not necessarily mean meaningful welfare standards.** Of the 30 certified product lines, 13 carried USDA Organic, a relatively weak animal-welfare program, as their only recognized animal-welfare certification. At the same time, zero products carried AWA, the strongest certification available.
- 5. Chicken exemplifies the gap between humane claims and reality.** The genetics that most determine a chicken’s welfare go unaddressed by “humane” labels, leaving shoppers with no way to avoid birds who are genetically destined for short and painful lives.

“Humanely Raised” Remains Undefined and Unenforceable

USDA has regulatory authority over what claims appear on meat and poultry packaging. Under the Federal Meat Inspection Act and Poultry Products Inspection Act, label claims such as “humanely raised” fall under the jurisdiction of USDA’s Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS).¹ That authority is precisely why FSIS’s animal-welfare policies matter—they are essentially the gatekeepers for what can be claimed.

FSIS has historically declined to define “humanely raised.” It instead only asks producers for a written description of their own definition and the parameters used to meet it.² In August 2024, after more than a decade of pressure from Farm Forward and allied groups,³ FSIS updated its animal-raising claim guidelines.⁴ At the time, Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack said the changes would “help to level the playing field” for businesses truthfully

using the claims and ensure that consumers could trust meat and poultry labels.⁵ The announcement, at first, was met with tentative excitement. **However, that excitement was tempered when it became apparent that the update continued to let producers define “humanely raised” however they liked, left third-party certification as something FSIS merely “encourages,” and offered no baseline definition of what a genuinely higher standard of welfare requires.**

This is not in line with what consumers expect. A 2021 Farm Forward poll found that Americans are largely unable to distinguish meaningful welfare certifications from marketing claims designed to obscure typical or mostly typical factory-farm practices.⁶ What’s more, conscientious shoppers—those who specifically seek higher welfare products—were the most susceptible to deception.⁷ Other research has aligned with these findings. A 2026

1 [Federal Meat Inspection Act](#), 21 U.S.C. § 607 (2024); [Poultry Products Inspection Act](#), 21 U.S.C. § 457 (2024).

2 U.S. Department of Agriculture, Food Safety and Inspection Service (USDA FSIS), [FSIS Guideline on Substantiating Animal-Raising or Environment-Related Labeling Claims](#), FSIS-GD-2024-0006 (August 2024), 10.

3 For an example of our advocacy pressure, see Andrew deCoriolis, Executive Director, Farm Forward, comment letter on Petition #23-03 (filed by Perdue Farms, LLC), [“Aligning the ‘Pasture Raised’ Label with Consumer Expectations,”](#) to Docket Clerk, Food Safety and Inspection Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture, August 15, 2023.

4 USDA FSIS, [FSIS Guideline](#).

5 USDA, [“USDA Releases Updated Guideline to Strengthen Substantiation of Animal-Raising and Environment-Related Claims on Meat and Poultry Labels,”](#) August 28, 2024.

6 Farm Forward, [Humanewashing’s Effect on Consumers: Survey of Consumer Beliefs About Welfare Certifications](#) (December 2021), 1.

7 Farm Forward, [Humanewashing’s Effect on Consumers](#), 11.



Photo: Balvik C. / We Animals

ASPCA survey, for example, found that eight in ten Americans believe welfare certifications for chicken raised for meat should require slower-growing birds⁸—a requirement imposed by virtually no higher welfare certification standards.

A substantive commitment to animal welfare is not reducible to one dimension, but involves housing and space, outdoor access, confinement, genetics, the presence (or absence) of painful procedures, the ability to express natural behaviors, and health outcomes broadly.⁹ A label that speaks to only one of these factors is not a partial answer to the question of humane treatment—it is a non-answer designed to look like problem solved.

This gap between what misleading labels *seem to say but don’t deliver* and what is actually true about factory farming is precisely what motivated more than a decade of advocacy from Farm Forward and groups like the Animal Welfare Institute, whose review of USDA’s own internal label-approval files found that the vast majority of animal-raising claims lacked meaningful substantiation.¹⁰ Two years later, this report assesses whether those concerns remain valid. We reviewed a sample of meat and poultry products carrying humane-style claims to analyze whether they carry third-party certification, whether their on-label definitions hold up, and what those certifications, when present, actually guarantee.

⁸ American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA), [“ASPCA Research and Surveys on Food & Farming Systems,”](#) accessed July 7, 2026.

⁹ Farm Forward, [“Highest Welfare Farming,”](#) accessed July 7, 2026.

¹⁰ Animal Welfare Institute (AWI), [Deceptive Consumer Labels: How the USDA’s Failure to Oversee Its Label Approval Program Allows the Meat Industry to Co-opt Humane and Sustainable Claims](#) (Washington, DC: AWI, March 2023).

Many “Humane” Claims Cannot Be Verified

Our first question was whether consumers can verify humane claims are meaningful. Two years after the FSIS update, the answer is still mostly no. Between October 2025 and March 2026, we reviewed 66 beef, pork, poultry, and lamb product lines labeled as humanely raised using product pages, label images, and producer websites. Only 45 percent carried a corresponding third-party certification visible on the package. The majority (55 percent) offered little to no way for shoppers to verify humane claims.

Table 1. Presence of third-party certification on the label, by animal category

Animal Category	On-label certified	On-label uncertified
Beef (n=17)	7 (41%)	10 (59%)
Pork (n=24)	10 (42%)	14 (58%)
Poultry (n=21)	12 (57%)	9 (43%)
Lamb (n=4)	1 (25%)	3 (75%)
All (n=66)	30 (45%)	36 (55%)

Third-party certification matters because it is the only way in our current regulatory environment for consumers to get any degree of independent verification. In its ideal form, certification comes in the form of a watchdog organization—an unbiased, reputable institution other than the producer itself—that has verified that *some* standard was in fact met. It is no guarantee of high welfare, but it is the floor below which a claim becomes pure deceptive marketing. In general, some certification is better than none.

USDA itself has acknowledged as much. Its 2024 guidance states that “FSIS strongly encourages use of third-party certification to substantiate animal-raising or environment-related claims, given the limits of FSIS jurisdiction,” because independent verification “helps ensure that such claims are truthful and not misleading.”¹¹ Despite this encouragement, the majority of products with humane labels in our sample still lacked on-package third-party verification. While our sample was not designed to estimate certification prevalence across the entire marketplace, it shows that USDA’s encouragement has not translated into widespread practice.

¹¹ USDA FSIS, [FSIS Guideline](#), 9.

When Companies Define “Humane” Themselves, the Definitions Don’t Hold Up to Scrutiny

The core shortcoming of the 2024 update is its continuation of the longstanding policy of allowing producers to define what they mean by terms like “humanely raised” or “raised with care.” The agency did not establish species-specific minimum welfare standards that farms must meet in order to use these claims.

FSIS’s own examples of compliance show—unequivocally—how low that bar can be. Its example of an acceptable, uncertified “humanely raised” chicken product defines the claim entirely by diet: “fed all vegetarian diet with no animal by-products.”¹² Its hypothetical pork example fares no better: “provided with proper shelter and resting areas,” with no specification of what that shelter must include.¹³ That FSIS presents these examples¹⁴ as sufficient shows exactly how weak its guidelines are.

Table 2. Categories of producer-written on-label definitions or explanations of “humane” claims (n=40). Percentages may not add up to 100 percent due to rounding.

Category	Count
Housing- or space-only definition	12 (30%)
Multi-factor welfare definition	10 (25%)
Feed-focused definition	7 (18%)
Vague well-being or “stress-free” language	7 (18%)
Self-referential or internal-policy definition	4 (10%)



Photo: Wes Burdett / We Animals

¹² USDA FSIS, [FSIS Guideline](#), 10.

¹³ USDA FSIS, [FSIS Guideline](#), 9.

¹⁴ Credit to the AWI for noting this at the time. See Zack Strong and Amanda Houdeschell, [“Comments on FSIS Guideline on Substantiating Animal-Raising or Environment-Related Labeling Claims \(Docket No. FSIS-2024-0010\).”](#) AWI, November 12, 2024, 3–4.

Three-quarters (30 of 40) of the producer-written, on-label definitions or explanations heavily relied on a single factor, vague language, or a self-referential internal policy. Ten of 40 (25 percent) addressed multiple welfare dimensions; eight of those ten came from Applegate. Many of the definitions we found reduce “humanely raised” to a single, often mostly meaningless, factor.

Table 3. Illustrative Examples of Insufficient Producer-Defined Humane Claims

Company	Product Type	Definition	Why It’s Insufficient
Wellshire Farms	Beef, pork, chicken, turkey	“Wellshire defines humanely raised as [all animal types] are vegetarian fed & never administered animal by-products”	A welfare claim defined entirely by diet. Feed has no bearing on housing, handling, or genetics.
Plainville Farms	Turkey (nonorganic)	“Meets Plainville Farms humane policy for raising turkeys in a stress free environment”	“Stress free” describes nothing a shopper can verify.
Bell & Evans	Chicken (nonorganic)	“Humanely raised defined by The Bell & Evans Humane Animal Welfare Standards”	Self-referential. Bell & Evans states that it does not participate in third-party paid certifications, instead asking consumers to refer to the company’s own welfare standards. ¹⁵
Swift Meats	Veal	“Swift defines Humanely Raised as Group Housed, in well ventilated, naturally lit barns that are heated where necessary”	Basic housing infrastructure offered as the definition of “humane.”

Several companies define “humanely raised” in terms of animal feed, a factor unrelated to questions of animal confinement, handling, slaughter, genetics, and disease. Others rely on generic notions like “stress-free environment” that lack any information about what practices constitute these conditions. Consider the following example from Dietz & Watson’s poultry line, which relies on vague language: “Dietz & Watson defines humanely raised as [chicken/turkey] raised in a healthy, reduced stress environment that promotes animal welfare and natural behavior,” and adds that the birds “thrive on wholesome feed with vitamins, minerals and abundant water.” This case exemplifies the problem of vagueness and irrelevance: feed type has little bearing on welfare, and the definition itself is generic. **Nothing in that definition—nor in many definitions—touches the specifics of confinement, handling, slaughter, or genetics; a bird raised in the most intensive conditions imaginable could meet it.**¹⁶ Under the current system, FSIS regulation demands that consumers trust producer-written marketing language in place of a verifiable standard.

¹⁵ Bell & Evans, “[Humane Animal Welfare](#),” accessed July 13, 2026.

¹⁶ AWI’s 2023 review found a similar pattern within USDA’s files: two of Dietz & Watson’s “Verified Humanely Raised” products had no label application on record at all, and a third was supported only by a humane-slaughter affidavit. AWI, [Deceptive Consumer Labels](#), 11.

Certification Does Not Necessarily Mean Meaningful Welfare Standards

Even when a humane claim is backed by third-party certification, that certification may guarantee far less than consumers expect. The certifications present in our sample were largely concentrated at the weak end of the market, and the strongest available program was entirely absent.

Table 4. Recognized certifications observed among certified product lines (n=30).¹⁷

Certification	Count
USDA Organic	18
Certified Humane	9
Global Animal Partnership (GAP) ¹⁸	9
CARE Certified	2
American Humane Certified	1
Animal Welfare Humane Certified (FACTA)	1

As shown in Table 4, USDA Organic was by far the most common certification observed: 18 of 30 certified products carried it, and for 13 of them it was the only recognized welfare certification on the label. USDA Organic has generally lax standards for animal welfare, as organic standards do not comprehensively ameliorate some of the most central concerns for animals raised under the system, such as fast-growing genetics, outdoor access for all species, and some painful body modifications.¹⁹ USDA’s Organic Livestock and Poultry Standards final rule, published in 2023 and effective in 2024, made some welfare improvements, especially for egg-laying hens. However, the rule’s most essential component—better space requirements for birds—will not see full implementation until 2029.²⁰

At the same time, we found *zero* products with Animal Welfare Approved (AWA) certification, one of the only programs on the market with standards that rise far above industry baselines (see Table 5 for more detail). Although AWA products are extremely

¹⁷ Counts total 40 across 30 certified product-line presentations because a product may display more than one recognized certification. For example, North Country Smokehouse organic turkey displays USDA Organic, Certified Humane, and Global Animal Partnership (GAP) Step 2. GAP appearances are separated according to whether a step was visible on the package. Two GAP appearances displayed the GAP program without a visible step; where a step was visible, the observed steps were 1, 2, or 4. Steps 5 and 5+ did not appear. Non-welfare seals were excluded.

¹⁸ GAP appearances noted on Table 4 are combined across certification levels.

¹⁹ Farm Forward, “[Label Guide](#),” Farm Forward, accessed July 7, 2026.

²⁰ ASPCA, “[New Rules for Farm Animals: How Is USDA Organic Changing?](#),” January 4, 2024.

uncommon in the marketplace, their complete absence from our sample—an unsurprising outcome even for a sample of more than 60 “humane” products—points to a broader issue: **products meeting substantially higher standards remain difficult for typical consumers to find among products carrying humane-style claims.** Also absent from our sample were GAP Steps 5 and 5+,²¹ two higher welfare certifications that better fit consumer expectations but are largely missing from grocery stores.²²

Certifications are confusing and opaque to consumers for many reasons.²³ Some multi-tiered certifications, with vastly different standards across tiers, simply apply the logo with no indication of tier, so they convey little about which standards were applied, which practices were prohibited, or how that program compares to other certifications. Further, hundreds of producers use many different animal welfare labeling schemes. Even conscientious consumers cannot always distinguish one from another, let alone track their differing meanings. Table 5 illustrates how dramatically the requirements imposed by different certifications can vary.



Photo: Ira Moon / We Animals

21 The animal welfare requirements for GAP vary drastically between steps. See Farm Forward, [“Label Guide.”](#)

22 Ben Goldsmith, [“Think You Can Find a Humanely Raised Turkey at Whole Foods for Thanksgiving? Think Again.”](#) Farm Forward (blog), November 9, 2021.

23 Animal-welfare certifications generally fall into three broad categories: some are industry-created programs, like United Egg Producers Certified, that largely codify existing industry practices; others are nonprofit-managed programs whose standards may still permit practices common in conventional production, such as American Humane Certified; and some independent certifications establish requirements that go beyond industry norms, such as GAP and Certified Humane. The result is a marketplace where a single word—“certified”—can represent dramatically different standards of animal care. See Farm Forward, [The Dirt on Humanewashing: A Farm Forward Report on Consumer Deception in Animal Welfare Certification](#) (December 2020), 8; [American Humane Society \(AHS\), American Humane Certified™ Animal Welfare Standards for Broiler Chickens](#) (AHS, 2024).

Table 5. The wide range of welfare standards represented by animal-welfare certifications²⁴

Welfare dimension	USDA Organic (most common; found in our sample)	American Humane Certified (among the weakest)	Animal Welfare Approved (highest welfare; absent from our sample)
Outdoor access / pasture	Outdoor access required. The 2024 rule prohibits enclosed porches from counting as outdoor space, but key broiler requirements do not take effect for previously certified operations until 2029.	Not required — birds need not go outdoors; dairy cows may be kept indoors	Continuous pasture and outdoor access
Cages & crates	No continuous confinement; cages largely disallowed	Battery cages are banned for hens. Gestation crates generally prohibited; short-term breeding stalls and restrictive farrowing crates permitted	Cages and close-confinement crates prohibited, including gestation and farrowing crates
Breed / growth rate	No breed or growth-rate standard	No breed or growth-rate standard	Breeds must be fit for outdoor life; breed growth is capped by default at approximately 40 g/day, ruling out the fastest-growing genetics
Factory farms (CAFOs / feedlots)	CAFO-scale operations permitted if organic methods are met	Permitted	Prohibited — pasture-based independent farms only

The typical shopper who sees these certifications and their bucolic logos may reasonably assume that they signal comparable, meaningful improvements over conventional production. This is often not the case. **Two products can carry the word “certified” while indicating entirely different lives for the animals behind them.**

24 Sources for the certification comparison include USDA, Agricultural Marketing Service, “[Organic Livestock and Poultry Standards](#),” accessed July 7, 2026; AHS, “[Farm Certification Standards](#),” accessed July 13, 2026; ASPCA, “[Certification and Label Guide](#),” accessed July 7, 2026; A Greener World, “[Animal Welfare Approved Meat Chicken Standards](#),” accessed July 7, 2026.

Chicken Exemplifies the Gap between Humane Claims and Reality

The weaknesses documented above are consequential across species, as all animals suffer in the factory farming system, but chicken provides the clearest example of what the labeling regime allows humane claims to obscure from the public’s view. **Unlike many welfare concerns that may vary from farm to farm, a chicken’s genetics are a fundamental condition of her life.** Yet current humane claims almost never communicate whether chickens were bred in ways that allow them to live healthy, functional lives.

More than 95 percent of chicken meat in the United States comes from birds bred for rapid growth and high meat yield;²⁵ that is, they are the result of a genetic program that, according to a landmark comparison of 1957, 1978, and 2005 broiler strains, increased broiler growth rates by more than 400 percent from 1957 to 2005.²⁶ That change has come at a debilitating physical cost for the birds, including well-documented rates of lameness, heart disease, and early death.²⁷ These birds are then confined in large industrial barns where they spend their entire lives in pain, standing or lying in their own waste. While this genetic selection has increased production efficiency, it has also created a bird whose body struggles to support its fast growth.²⁸ By contrast, birds who grow significantly more slowly have better health outcomes overall: they are more likely to engage in natural behaviors like foraging and dust-bathing, and are less likely to suffer from debilitating and painful chronic health issues.²⁹ **Yet these healthier breeds remain rare in chicken production, including among products carrying humane-style claims.**

25 ASPCA, [“Ending the Use of Unhealthy Chicken Breeds,”](#) accessed July 7, 2026.

26 M. J. Zuidhof et al., [“Growth, Efficiency, and Yield of Commercial Broilers from 1957, 1978, and 2005,”](#) Poultry Science 93, no. 12 (December 2014): 2970–82.

27 Anja B. Riber and Kaitlin E. Wurtz, [“Impact of Growth Rate on the Welfare of Broilers,”](#) Animals 14, no. 22 (2024): 3330.

28 The modern broiler represents one of the most dramatic examples of human-driven changes to an animal’s biology. Some researchers have argued that, because of the scale and intensity of these changes, “broiler chickens vividly symbolize the transformation of the biosphere to fit evolving human consumption patterns, and show clear potential to be a biostratigraphic marker species of the Anthropocene.” See Carys E. Bennett et al., [“The Broiler Chicken as a Signal of a Human Reconfigured Biosphere,”](#) Royal Society Open Science 5, no. 12 (December 2018): 180325.

29 Rosemary H. Whittle et al., [“Effects of Genetic Strain, Stocking Density, and Age on Broiler Behavior,”](#) Poultry Science 104 (2025): 104723.

Nor is the issue simply that chicken products often lack meaningful welfare certifications or that humane claims are inconsistently defined. **Rather, the miserable lives of most chickens demonstrate the consequences of a labeling system that does not require meaningful baseline welfare standards.** Even when consumers encounter a humane claim, they often have no way of knowing whether the animal behind that label had slower-growing genetics, improved mobility, reduced risk of disease, or broader protections from the major welfare challenges associated with poultry farming specifically.

“Slower-growing” breeds represent an actual, measurable welfare improvement, though all carry some degree of welfare trade-offs. However, they are effectively absent from the mainstream chicken market, including the “humane” market.³⁰ In a separate search, we found seven product lines marketed as “slower-growing” or “slow growth,” and they came largely from a separate set of brands and specialty product lines, including heritage and heirloom offerings, rather than the mainstream chicken lines sold by the large brands that dominate the grocery shelves.³¹ The big names associated with chicken products almost never have an option other than the fastest-growing, worst-off birds.³² A shopper choosing among the mainstream “humanely raised” chicken brands is, on the question that matters most for that bird’s welfare, choosing among more or less identical genetics.

This is the opposite of what consumers expect when prompted. The 2026 ASPCA survey found that eight in ten Americans want welfare certifications for meat chickens to require slower-growing, healthier breeds.³³ Farm Forward’s own 2021 polling found a similar gap: roughly 40 percent of respondents believed that certifications like GAP, American Humane Certified, and One Health Certified meant birds were not genetically modified for unnaturally fast growth, while a majority believed that they should mean that.³⁴

Chickens offer the most straightforward and clear view of a broader problem affecting all species examined in this report: the typical shopper has virtually no way to know what humane claims *actually mean for the animal behind the label.*

30 The reality is that genuinely better breeds are almost entirely missing from the United States chicken supply. ASPCA, [“Ending the Use of Unhealthy Chicken Breeds.”](#)

31 These products were identified through a separate web search targeting explicit “slow growth”-type label claims; the seven product lines are not part of the 66-entry sample. There are numerous slower-growing chicken breeds distinct from heritage breeds, which generally have some of the best welfare outcomes. See Farm Forward, [“Heritage Chickens versus Hybrid Chickens: What Is the Difference?”](#) accessed June 11, 2026.

32 ASPCA, [“Ending the Use of Unhealthy Chicken Breeds.”](#)

33 ASPCA, [“ASPCA Research and Surveys on Food & Farming Systems.”](#)

34 Farm Forward, [Humanewashing’s Effect on Consumers](#), 9.

Conclusion

Two years ago, USDA had an opportunity to address the core problem with so-called “humane” claims: that they mean whatever a producer says they mean. **Unfortunately, USDA didn’t take the opportunity to require that these claims have any content. Two years later, our analysis shows the practical consequences of that choice.** A slight majority of humanely labeled products in our sample displayed no independent third-party certification on the label. Of the definitions producers did provide, many described feed or vague housing conditions rather than the confinement, genetics, or health outcomes that actually determine an animal’s welfare. Among the minority of products that carried certification, the most common program was one of the weaker ones on the market, USDA Organic, while, at the same time, the strongest programs available were not found in our sample. **And when it comes to chickens, some of America’s most commonly consumed animals,³⁵ humane-style labels say essentially nothing about the most important factor affecting the birds’ welfare: genetics and breed.**

This is not inevitable. Rather, it is the result of a regulatory framework that, rather than setting a meaningful standard, allows producers to subjectively assess their own standards. USDA has encouraged certification without setting a meaningful floor for what “humane” must mean. The result is a marketplace in which most products in our sample lacked recognized on-label certification, while the certifications that did appear varied dramatically in their welfare requirements. **Instead, USDA must pursue enforceable, species-specific minimum standards; mandatory third-party verification; and a definition of “humanely raised” that cannot be satisfied merely by a line about vegetarian feed or stress-free environments.**

Until FSIS makes those changes, “humanely raised” may remain what it has been since before the 2024 update: a phrase the industry writes and the government rubber-stamps before it appears on grocery shelves across the country, in claims devoid of content.

³⁵ Grace Grossen, [“Per Capita Availability of Red Meat and Poultry Projected Higher in 2025 and 2026,”](#) Charts of Note, USDA, Economic Research Service, August 21, 2025.

Policy Recommendations



Photo: Jo-Anne McArthur / We Animals

To create a marketplace in which animal welfare claims provide meaningful information to consumers, FSIS should:

1. Require, and not simply encourage, ongoing third-party verification for animal welfare claims.
2. Codify clear, species-specific baseline standards for animal-raising claims, addressing housing and space, outdoor access, confinement methods, genetics and growth rate, painful bodily modifications, opportunities for natural behavior, and health outcomes.
3. Require that “humanely raised” claims on chicken reflect the use of only higher welfare, slower-growing breeds.

Voluntary guidance has been tried. It has not fixed a marketplace where humane claims are unverifiable and where the strongest certification available is difficult to find on grocery store shelves. Meaningful reform requires enforceable standards, not additional encouragement and self-definition.

Appendix

Methods

To assess how animal-welfare claims on labels are substantiated by recognized third-party certification, we conducted a review of a convenience sample of online meat and poultry product line label presentations carrying animal-welfare claims (e.g., “humanely raised” and “raised with care”). **The purpose of this analysis was not to estimate the prevalence of certification across the entire U.S. meat market, but rather to document the types of substantiation consumers may encounter when purchasing products carrying animal-welfare claims.** Products were reviewed using label images, online product listings, and other publicly available product information.

Because this analysis focused on the FSIS 2024 guideline update, it was limited to meat and poultry products. Products regulated principally by other agencies, such as milk, cheese, and eggs, were outside the scope of this report but may be revisited in the future. See below for more about sample selection.

Sample Selection

Products were identified online between October 2025 and March 2026 using available online product pages, label images, and other information found on producer websites.

Products qualified for this analysis if they:

- Were regulated by USDA FSIS in the context of the 2024 update;
- Carried an animal-welfare claim on the label; and
- Had sufficient imagery or information to evaluate the claim and any accompanying certification.

Products outside FSIS’s scope or without qualifying claims or adequate label imagery were excluded. One poultry product line was initially included, then removed from the final analysis because sufficient imagery could not be obtained. The unit of analysis was a distinct company, animal category, and consumer-facing product-line label presentation. Products sharing the same on-label claim, definition, and certification combination were counted once. Organic and nonorganic versions were counted separately when their certification logos differed. The final sample contained 66 entries: beef (17), pork (24), poultry (21), and lamb (4).

Data Collection and Certification Assessment

For each entry, the following information was noted:

- Animal welfare claims appearing on the label
- Any accompanying on-label explanation or definition
- Explanations provided elsewhere on the producer’s website
- The presence or absence of third-party certification logos
- Other certification programs displayed

The relevant certification measure was whether a recognized third-party certification appeared on the product label. This reflected the information available to consumers. Information found elsewhere on the producer’s website was recorded separately but was not treated as accompanying the claim unless it appeared with the product. Relevant certifications identified in this analysis included USDA Organic, Global Animal Partnership, Certified Humane, American Humane Certified, CARE Certified, and FACTA/Animal Welfare Humane Certified. We do not claim that these are the only certification programs that could affect animal welfare. Further, there can be disagreement about what qualifies as a third-party certification. For this analysis, company-developed or proprietary welfare programs were not classified as third-party certifications. USDA Organic was counted as a third-party certification because certification is performed by USDA-accredited certifying agents and the organic standards include care and treatment requirements.

Assessment of Producer-Defined Claims

For each product carrying a humane claim, we reviewed any available producer-provided definitions or explanations accompanying the animal-welfare claim, whether or not the product also carried a third-party certification. A definition was counted if presented as a definition or substantiation on the package. A certification logo or reference was not counted as a producer-written definition of the humane claim. Definitions were categorized according to the primary type of substantiation provided (e.g., feed-focused, housing-focused, vague welfare language, self-referential standards, or multi-factor welfare definitions).

Limitations

This analysis relied on a convenience sample and was not designed to offer statistically representative estimates of the prevalence of certification or animal-welfare claims across the U.S. meat and poultry market. As such, the results should be understood as descriptive of the products reviewed, rather than representative of all products carrying animal-welfare claims. Additionally, because the analysis was based on product labels and publicly available information, it did not include on-farm audits or independent verification of production practices. Instead, the analysis focused on the information plausibly available to consumers.

Author and Acknowledgements

Farm Forward was founded in 2007 as the nation’s first nonprofit devoted exclusively to ending factory farming. We are a team of strategists, campaigners, and thought leaders guiding the movement to change the way our world eats and farms. More information about Farm Forward’s work and our other publications can be found at farmforward.com.

This issue brief was written by Trevor McCarty, with invaluable contributions from Farm Forward staff and animal welfare consultant Dena Jones.