



Briefing – Research reveals widespread confusion among most consumers over meat and dairy product labels.

Report published December 2014

Consumers are confused by meat and dairy labels

The *European Product Labels Research* (<http://bit.ly/149fszG>) provides compelling evidence that, based on the label alone, most consumers, even those who feel they have ‘a reasonable, basic knowledge’ or ‘a good knowledge’ about ‘how farm animals are kept and reared’, are likely to misinterpret the farming method used for meat and dairy products (Qa Research, 2014). Most consumers are unable to identify from the label how the animals that provided the meat or dairy products were farmed, such as whether they were kept outdoors, indoors with good facilities, or in basic conditions, or in a mixture of these systems.

- It provides evidence of the views of actual consumers of these types of products from each country.
- It shows that confusing labels are not restricted to a single country or product range.
- It provides very strong basis for introducing measures to ensure consumers are accurately informed, about the farm system used to produce meat and dairy products sold in the European Union.

This research was undertaken by independent consumer analysts Qa, on behalf of Labelling Matters.¹ Labelling Matters believes this is the most comprehensive research to have taken place on confusing meat and dairy product labelling in Europe. Over 3,000 interviews were completed, at least 1,000 in each country, with a representative sample of consumers.

- Nine labels found in UK supermarkets were tested on 1,001 UK consumers, including one example of good practice.
- Eleven labels found in German supermarkets were tested on 1,003 German consumers, including one example of good practice.
- Seven labels found in Spanish supermarkets were tested on 1,000 Spanish consumers.

We have defined meat and dairy product labels as ‘confusing’ if they imply higher welfare standards, or the use of more extensive farm systems, than actually exist for the animals used in the products. For example, imagery implying good welfare may include photographs or illustrations of fields and countryside, or cartoons of ‘happy animals’. Phrases which many may associate with higher welfare may include, ‘Farm Fresh’, ‘Country Fresh’, or ‘Natural’.

Label selection

Between June and September 2012 Labelling Matters volunteers were asked to collect meat and dairy product labels from around the EU. We asked them to help identify labels that they felt might be confusing to the average consumer. In particular we invited submissions of labels that appeared to denote outdoor

systems and higher welfare standards, but which provided no specific written information or welfare-related logo to suggest the implied standards were in fact realised.

We received nearly two hundred labels from nations around the EU. The labels selected for the research were from three Member States, and were selected as good examples of confusing labelling.² (We also used a 'control label', an example of good practice, for the UK and German research. We were unable to find an example of good practice for the Spanish research.)

Since receiving each label Labelling Matters has worked hard to contact the companies to identify the actual farm system used to produce each food product. We have searched company websites, made phone calls to companies, and written to each company to offer them a right of reply. In short we have done everything – and more – that could be expected of a concerned consumer to find out about the farm systems used to produce these products.

We are now reasonably confident that the labels below promote products from animals kept in standard intensive systems, or, in the case of dairy, that there is no way of knowing whether the product is from permanently housed dairy cattle or those with pasture access, grazing being a core aspect of dairy cow behaviour.

Our intention is not to point a finger at individual food companies or individual nations. Instead the labels – and the public's response to them – are intended to demonstrate a widespread problem, which we believe the European Commission should address. Furthermore it should not be assumed that the problem is greater in the Member States represented below; they may well be typical of many Member States.

Control label – UK

The UK's 'Chicken – Co-op' label is an example of good practice. The chicken has been reared in a 'Free range' system. This is clearly marked, using just two words. This label recorded the highest, most accurate consumer response. 67% of consumers accurately identified that the product had been reared either 'outside', or 'a mixture of inside and outside'. This compares with the 39% of consumers who accurately identified that 'Chicken – Ashfield Farm' had been reared 'inside'.

It is helpful to reflect that the free range 'Chicken – Co-op' figure of 67% is consistent with Qa's 2013 research for Labelling Matters. In this earlier research, 70% of UK consumers indicated that they felt Labelling Matters' proposed method of production labelling terms for poultrymeat (Organic, Free-range, Extensive indoor, Intensive indoor) were clear. 75% thought that if this labelling system was introduced they'd be 'very likely' or 'quite likely' to use it.

Control label – Germany

The label on the German 'Chicken Fairmast (Plukon)' chicken slices label denotes better welfare outcomes and references a well-managed enriched indoor farm system. However, the information on the label is relatively complex and requires comparison with products of a different tier of the Vier Pfoten farm animal welfare scheme, which may or may not be available. Only 34% of consumers accurately identified that the product had been reared 'inside'. This compared with the 43% of consumers who accurately identified that the intensively produced 'Chicken – Hubers Landhendl' had been reared 'inside'.

It is impossible to know for sure from this research why the Fairmast label was poorly understood. However, it may indicate that many consumers only associate higher welfare with outdoor systems. While well-managed outdoor systems offer the very best potential for animal welfare, well-managed enriched indoor systems can provide a better quality of life for chickens than un-enriched intensive indoor systems or poorly managed outdoor systems.

In our view, only a straightforward mandatory system, where all animal products are labelled by method of production and easy to compare, can properly empower consumers to make a fair comparison and accurately identify the welfare provenance of products. Better education around farm systems and labelling will further benefit consumers.

European Union political context

Delivering market-driven improvements in farm animal welfare

The EU Strategy for the Protection and Welfare of Animals 2012-2015 emphasises the EU's intention to empower consumers to make informed choices in order that the market can drive further improvements in farm animal welfare. Labelling Matters believes mandatory method of production labelling of meat and dairy products is the best way for the Commission to deliver on this central aspect of its strategy. Clear, objective labelling provides consumers with the information they most want to know: 'how was this animal kept?'

Confusing meat and dairy labels inhibit marketplace growth for higher welfare products

This research demonstrates that the market place for higher welfare animal products in the EU is unhelpfully distorted, against higher welfare meat and dairy products, by the widespread use of confusing labels for meat and dairy products from systems likely to result in lower welfare.

The widespread existence of confusing labels undermines the competitiveness of higher welfare brands and disincentivises further improvements and innovation.

Intensive farming is now the norm for key food species in the EU. Reasonable estimates suggest that around 90% of pigs reared for meat in the EU are housed in barren systems (around 220 million pigs annually). Similarly around 90% of broiler chickens in the EU are produced in standard intensive systems (around five billion annually). The dairy picture is more complex, but statistics show that dairy farming is becoming more intensive, which in some countries is often associated with an increase in the time spent indoors and zero-grazing (Compassion in World Farming, 2013 (a) – (c)).

While farming methods have changed, public perceptions of farm systems have not kept pace. As the research shows, there now appears to be a strong disconnect between people's assumptions about European farming systems and the methods of production actually employed by most European farmers.

This research demonstrates consumers are confused, explicitly or implicitly, over the farm systems used to produce their meat and dairy foods. This is important because labels influence consumer behaviour directly at point of sale. They can have a potentially significant adverse economic impact on those producers operating to higher welfare standards because they disturb natural consumer preferences, preventing the market place from operating efficiently.

As well as affecting farm incomes this market distortion represents a significant challenge to European Commission ambitions for farm animal welfare, as described in the EU Animal Welfare Strategy 2012-2015. The strategy emphasises the EU's intention to increase transparency and the provision of adequate information – empowering consumers to make informed choices in order that the market can drive further improvements in farm animal welfare.

The guiding principle of the strategy is that 'everyone is responsible'. However, it is very difficult for consumers to drive improvements in animal welfare if they are unable to accurately identify the farming system used to produce meat and dairy products for purchase.

The success of egg labelling

The European Commission has recognised the success of the mandatory method of production labelling scheme for shell eggs, introduced in 2004.

- Commission figures show the proportion of cage-free egg-laying hens in Europe rose from 19.7% in 2003 to 42.2% in 2012 (European Commission, 2013).
- Independent research shows an average recognition rate of 59% among European consumers in 2013 (Qa, 2013).
- The Commission has officially recognised the link between increased sales of higher welfare eggs and mandatory labelling since 2004. They have also recognised that the labelling scheme allows consumer-supported price differentiation (European Commission, 2014).

Landmark 2013 consumer research

The *European Product Labels Research* should be considered in conjunction with landmark research findings in 2013, which showed decisively that consumers from across Europe want honest labelling of meat and dairy products. The research showed:

- Very strong support for extending method of production labelling to meat and dairy products
- High levels of recognition of the EU's existing egg labelling scheme
- Strong support for the chicken meat labelling terms proposed by Labelling Matters
- Support for these labelling terms to be backed with robust outcome-based assessments
- Strong support for useful information on food packaging

Conclusion

The *European Product Labels Research* provides compelling evidence that, based on the label alone, most consumers, even those who feel they have '*a reasonable, basic knowledge*' or '*a good knowledge*' about '*how farm animals are kept and reared*', are likely to misinterpret the method of production used for meat and dairy products.

We are concerned that confusing labels on intensively produced meat and dairy products unhelpfully distort the marketplace against higher welfare products. The widespread existence of confusing labels undermines the competitiveness of higher welfare brands and disincentivises further improvements and innovation.

Clear, honest labelling of meat and dairy produce is critical if the European Commission is to deliver on its ambition of market-driven improvements in farm animal welfare. Method of production labelling is not about telling people what to buy – it's about giving them a straightforward choice.

Footnotes

1. Labelling Matters is a partnership project of Compassion in World Farming, Eurogroup for Animals, RSPCA, and Soil Association. www.labellingmatters.org
2. The labels selected for the research were from three Member States, and were selected as good examples of confusing labelling. These MS were selected primarily because we had substantial numbers of labels from each of these nations. Only three nations were selected for budget reasons.

References

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