

THE MORNING NEWS

Local News for Northwest Arkansas

Producers, Consumer Groups Debate 'Natural' Definition

By Kim Souza
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Can chicken injected with up to 15 percent salt water and seaweed extract be packaged with a "100 percent all natural" label?

Sure.

According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the salt water and seaweed are natural. Injecting natural products into another natural product is not unnatural, the USDA says.

However, the USDA policy has divided the poultry industry and united a coalition asking the federal government to redefine its diluted version of "natural."

Widely touted as affordable, healthy and natural, chicken is a favorite choice for Americans who consume on average 86 pounds annually.

But those Arkansas consumers might be surprised to know that chicken labeled "natural" could be injected with up to 15 percent salt water. It could contain carrageenan, a seaweed extract that allows the chicken to hold on to the salt and water during processing.

Also, the fine print on the back of a chicken package labeled "100 percent all natural" could show that the chicken contains up to seven times the extra salt of nonenhanced varieties. The extra solution, some critics argue, also costs Americans up to \$2 billion in extra weight charges.

CHICKEN CHOICES

Despite the fact that Arkansas is home to many chicken processing companies, consumers don't always have a lot of choices when shopping for chicken.

Tyson Foods' brand is most commonly found at area retailers and sometimes is the only brand offered. The company processes and packages both the "enhanced" chicken along with lower-sodium poultry cuts for its wholesale customers.

Consumers who shop for fresh chicken at many Wal-Mart stores are limited to Tyson Foods' "100 percent all-natural" product that

is enhanced with up to 15 percent chicken broth. Consumers must read the tiny print on the back of the package to see that the chicken also contains chicken broth, sea salt and natural flavorings.

A similar looking package of Tyson Foods' fresh chicken touting the 100 percent all-natural label found at Northwest Arkansas' Harp's Food Stores bears the disclosure of only 3 percent added solution. This product lies in the meat case beside the Smart Chicken brand labeled "no added water." Smart Chicken is produced by MBA Poultry based in Tecumseh, Neb.

A promise the Springdale-based Harp's Foods makes to its customers is to include fresh meat choices with no solution added.

Officials with Springdale-based Tyson Foods said it is not uncommon for retailers to carry only one brand and many consumers prefer the "enhanced" variety because of its added tenderness.

"We had a similar situation in our retail stores on the West Coast, until consumers pressured Wal-Mart and other retailers to carry the healthier alternative because it is readily available," said Bill Mattos, president of the California Poultry Federation.

San Francisco-based Foster Farms, the nation's seventh largest poultry company according to the National Chicken Council, supplies West Coast retailers chicken devoid of extra solution, Mattos said.

When asked about offering lower-salt varieties of chicken available from Tyson Foods and other poultry companies, a Wal-Mart official said it already offers customers a wide variety of products from which to choose.

"The fresh chicken with 100 percent natural labels found in Wal-Mart stores is just that -- 100 percent natural, raised without antibiotics and containing no artificial ingredients," said Deisha Galberth, a Wal-Mart spokeswoman.

The company said its meat products always meet -- and often exceed -- federal guidelines.

COVERT SODIUM?

Industry watchers say the problem for consumers is two-fold: They are paying for something they aren't getting and the sodium contents found in some of the "enhanced" labels can run seven times higher than non-enhanced brands. That's the view espoused by Rep. Dennis Cardoza, D-Calif. and Rep. Charles "Chip" Pickering, R-Miss., leaders of a Congressional effort to review federal labeling laws.

Several poultry brands carry a seal from the American Heart Association for being low in saturated fat and cholesterol, but enhanced brands can contain much higher levels of sodium that can rival a large order of McDonald's fries, said Cardoza.

Among Tyson Foods products on sale in Northwest Arkansas, the sodium content ranged from 40 milligrams to 180 milligrams in a 4 oz. serving of the exact same breast cuts sold in different stores. Both packages tout the 100 percent all-natural label. The low-salt package contained less than 3 percent of retained water while the higher sodium packaging contained up to 15 percent chicken broth.

Unless a consumer takes the time to read the fine print and shops at a retailer who offers a choice, they could be misled, Mattos said.

"Americans consume way too much sodium as it is, and the last we need is more sodium tucked covertly into otherwise low-sodium foods," said Michael F. Jacobson, executive director for the Center for Science and Public Interest.

Tyson Foods says its products contain relatively low sodium and are popular with consumers.

"When comparing the Tyson brand to other major brands, research indicates that even in our enhanced varieties the sodium content in Tyson chicken is three times lower than other major competitors," said Dave Hogberg, senior vice president for Tyson Foods.

Hogberg also said the company's research with a broad section of consumers found that many who buy the unmarinated cuts will marinate them at home, adding their own salt to the product.

NATURAL DEBATE

The practice of adding extra solution has divided the competitive U.S. poultry industry. The two largest packers, Tyson Foods and Pittsburg, Texas-based Pilgrim's Pride Corp. admittedly add chicken broth containing sea salt to some of their product that bears the 100 percent all-natural label.

The USDA defines the term "natural" as a product that contains no artificial ingredients or added color and is only minimally processed. Tyson Foods and Pilgrim's Pride defend the use of salt water solution, and say that their research indicates that consumers prefer the taste of the marinated varieties and aren't bothered by the added ingredients because they, too, are natural.

Because salt and water naturally occur in the environment, the government allows chicken processors to pump those ingredients into the chicken and sell it under the 100 percent all-natural label. The opposition claims the USDA has literally watered down the meaning of "natural."

Three smaller producers, Laurel, Miss.-based Sanderson Farms, California-based Foster Farms and Pennsylvania-based Perdue Farms Inc. -- which each produce chicken with no added solution and also use the 100 percent all-natural label -- are crying foul.

The Truthful Labeling Coalition -- a Washington, D.C.-based lobbying group funded by natural chicken producers -- say the use of salt solution first occurred in 2003 after Bentonville-based Wal-Mart Stores Inc. reportedly approached all the major U.S. chicken processors about standardizing the packaged weight of fresh chicken to use one

bar code for like items.

The coalition said in accordance with what the USDA allowed, processors were told they could add up to 15 percent water solution to the chicken under the guidelines. Tyson Foods said Wal-Mart is not the only retailer using standardized packaged weight products.

PARTING WAYS

Most meat packers obliged Wal-Mart, but Sanderson Farms and a few other producers said no.

Three years ago, Sanderson Farms stopped doing business with Wal-Mart because of the standardized packaging push, said Lampkin Butts, president and chief operating officer for Sanderson Farms.

At the time, Butts said Sanderson Farms was supplying fresh chicken to Wal-Mart's Mississippi region.

Butts said the retailer went to exact weight packaging for marketing reasons, but it was 10 percent to 15 percent more expensive for processors because the USDA prohibits packers from putting less in a package than the weight charged; which meant the processor would have to give away some meat. He said that was when packers began injecting between 10 percent to 15 percent solution into the package to even out the weights.

Sanderson Farms conducted its own research and found that 95 percent of consumers they surveyed preferred brands with the "natural" label.

Butts said Sanderson didn't want to add extra solution because it wanted to use the natural label. He said the company walked away from Wal-Mart and began marketing to other grocers.

Sanderson Farms management had no problem with competitors who add the solution until last fall when the USDA allowed those competitors to begin using the 100 percent all-natural label, Butts said.

Likewise, the Truthful Labeling Coalition does not take issue with companies who choose to sell enhanced varieties such as those marinated in spices and rubs. The issue

is that some consumers are being led to believe the chicken they buy is nothing but chicken, when it contains up to 15 percent sodium solution, Mattos said.

WEIGHTY ISSUE

Most consumers are unaware that solution is in their "all natural" chicken, said Cardoza, who cited a recent national survey of more than 1,008 homes. He said 70 percent of the consumers had no idea that some poultry companies were routinely adding sodium and other additives into fresh chicken bearing the natural label.

Government documents dating back to the 2004 Laws and Regulations Committee of the Central Weights and Measures Administration claim the labeling of products containing added solution are "extremely vague and potentially misleading to consumers."

Cardoza said of the homes recently surveyed, 75 percent of consumers failed to see the disclosure.

Cardoza and Pickering have petitioned the USDA's Food Safety Inspection Service to change its policies related to the use of the term natural on fresh poultry products.

The industry estimates up to 30 percent of all fresh chicken sold to U.S. consumers bearing the all-natural label has been pumped up -- through either injection or vacuum tumbling -- with a significant percentage of water, sodium, binding agents like carrageenan and other additives.

"Historically, market prices for items sold correlated to a fair weight of the product. Today up to 15 percent of the weight in some chicken packages is water, not chicken," said Pickering, the Mississippi congressman.

Pickering estimates the cost to Americans is more than \$2 billion in extra weight charged as chicken that is instead another less-expensive solution.

REVIEW PROCESS

The Center for Food Safety, a non-profit public interest group with offices in Washington and San Francisco, would like to see the USDA reconsider the government's

wide interpretation for the natural label.

"We sincerely hope if the USDA decides to modify the present guidelines there will be adequate discussion time for all interested groups, because industry discussions alone do not do much for consumer confidence," said spokesman Charles Margulis.

A recent federal petition brought by Hormel Foods with respect to natural labeling has given the poultry industry another chance to rekindle the debate by asking the USDA to rethink the all-natural labeling guidelines.

It is unclear what the USDA is doing to respond to the labeling criticism.

The issue, according to Mattos, is under the review of the office of Dr. Richard Raymond, head of the Food Safety and Inspection division of the USDA.

Raymond's office issued the following statement to The Morning News: "The government welcomes interested groups to submit their comments regarding the definition of 'natural' as the deadline for discussion about this issue has been extended."