Trade group’s definition of ‘natural’ to exceed organic standards
Consumer survey shows ‘confusion’ over competing marketing claims ‘organic’ vs. ‘natural,’ says Organic & Natural Health Assoc.

by Sustainable Food News
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Based on the results of a national survey confirming "more confusion in the marketplace" among consumers over the food marketing claims "natural" and "organic," the Organic & Natural Health Association’s is poised to establish a standard for "natural."

The survey of 1,005 U.S. consumers conducted in January by Natural Marketing Institute (NMI) found that about 33 percent of U.S. consumers do not make a quality distinction between the terms "natural" and "organic."

And while three-fourths of consumers perceive that organic foods must be at least 95 percent free from synthetic additives, almost two-thirds of consumers expect the same standard from "natural" foods, according to the survey’s results.

About 50 percent of those surveyed believe that "natural" means the product is free of synthetic pesticides and do not contain genetically modified organisms (GMOs), "attributes that are unique characteristics of organic products," Washington, D.C.-based O&N said.

More consumers using ‘natural,’ says survey

The survey also showed that consumer were more likely to use "natural" than "organic" foods. In fact, 60 percent reported using organic less than once a week or not at all with more than a third using natural once a day or more.

Regulating ‘natural’

The survey also found that 61 percent of consumers said the U.S. government regulates the term "organic," while 46 percent believed the same for the term "natural."
Both the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) have weighed in on parameters for use of the term "natural" on foods.

The USDA said "natural" can be used on labeling for meat and poultry products as long as they contain no artificial ingredients, coloring ingredients, or chemical preservatives; and the product and its ingredients are not more than minimally processed, meaning fresh meat and poultry automatically qualify for the use of the term "natural" on product labeling.

The trade group said its definition of "natural" will be comparable to the definition of "organic," in that it will that all natural-labeled food not contain genetically modified organisms (GMOs), artificial preservatives, colors, flavors or sweeteners.

What is 'natural' meat?

In some cases, O&N said there will be additional criteria beyond organic standards. For example, beef products labeled as "natural" must meet the requirements of the USDA's national organic standards but must also be grass-fed and pastured to earn a natural designation. The USDA issued a voluntary standard for grass-fed marketing claims in October 2007.

According to the survey, the marketing claims "no added growth hormones" and "antibiotic free" are the most important attributes for consumers if a meat is to be labeled as "natural," while humane treatment attributes - humanely raised, free range, and pasture raised - are of secondary importance, the survey showed.

The FDA has not developed a definition for use of the term "natural" or its derivatives, including "all-natural." However, the agency said it "does not object" to use of the term "natural" on food as long as it does not contain added color, artificial flavors, or synthetic substances.

Clarifying 'natural'

“The organic industry needs to continually educate the consumer as to the differentiating attributes of organic from natural in order to elevate the status of organic,” O&N said. “In addition, those manufacturers involved in the natural space may need to further clarify the meaning of natural, so that it does not become diluted and lose its value.”

One major barrier is price perceptions for organic as a majority of consumers, including heavy organic users, say natural foods are less expensive than organic, the survey showed.

Food carrying a "natural" claim had a higher frequency of usage among consumers, with 36 percent using it once a day or more often (heavy use), compared to 23 percent for organic food consumption, according to the survey.
New definition of ‘natural’

Meanwhile, specific labeling requirements for foods under O&N's definition of "natural" will be similar to those under the USDA’s certified-organic label. For instance, 95 percent of all ingredients must qualify under the "natural" definition, "with explicit definition of ingredients qualifying for the five percent exclusion," O&N said, adding that for fortified food and dietary supplements, synthetic vitamins will qualify for the exclusion with the exception of synthetic vitamin E and D.

O&N said food companies seeking to label their products under its definition of "natural" must submit supply-chain traceability documentation, including monitoring and testing of raw ingredients.

O&N said its next step is to develop a voluntary regulatory compliance and certification program for the term "natural" to be released during the first half of 2016. The group will then launch a consumer education campaign.

"The overarching intent of this survey is to improve access to quality organic and truly natural food, products and services," said Karen Howard, O&N CEO. "Our goal is to support increased access through consumer research and education and we are now embarking on the development of a program that will create a clear, meaningful definition for natural foods, followed by a definition for natural supplements."

Sustainable Food News will be updating this article following a 6 p.m. ET interview with Howard.

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