

New meat-labeling regulation will standardize nutritional information

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While the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Food Safety and Inspection Service now seeks to provide nutrition information for 40 of the most popular meat and poultry products, an expert in Penn State's College of Agricultural Sciences suggests that the revised rule still leaves some questions unanswered.

"Many meat industry commodity groups support the new label requirements," said Chris Raines, assistant professor of meat science and technology and extension meats specialist. "They want to see more accurate [nutritional information](#) in the hands of U.S. consumers.

"Many consumers still don't realize how healthy and nutritious most meat is," he said. "For example, the industry group Meatmatters did a survey recently that showed that consumers overestimate [fat](#) content in red meat by up to 20 percent."

The move to provide more information on meat labels stems from a 1993 initiative that sought to have meat retailers provide consumers with [nutrition information](#). That voluntary measure was not as successful as the U.S. Department of Agriculture hoped, because only about half of retailers complied with the program.

As a result, federal officials decided in 2010 to make labeling requirements a mandatory rule starting Jan. 1, 2012. This comprehensive nutritional labeling rule requires providing accurate values for many different cuts of meat that naturally vary in their amounts of fats, protein, minerals and calories.

"The USDA understands the scope of such a project, so it addressed those problems by adding exemptions for small processors and retailers," Raines said. "It also whittled the number of affected whole-muscle cuts down to the 40 most popular."

But one weakness in the new rule is that it doesn't address the variation in [fat content](#) or composition, said Raines. This is an important component in the [nutritional value](#) of an individual cut.

"Whole-muscle meat cuts' fat contents vary according to fat trim depth (for instance, 1/8 inch vs. 1/4 inch) and marbling, the white flecks of fat within the meat," he said. "A steak graded USDA Prime will have more intramuscular fat than one graded USDA Select."

The USDA ruling can affect processors that don't pay for a USDA meat grader (which is completely different from a USDA food-safety inspector) to assign grades to carcasses. Without proper meat grading, the federal agency will be forced to offer less-accurate, blanket nutritional information for these whole-muscle products.

"Small processors who already use statements of percent fat and percent lean on their ground products will be exempt from further labeling," Raines said. "Some small processors are exempt from nutrition-label requirements entirely. And products that are custom butchered will not require labeling."

Raines pointed out that producers and retailers of niche-market products that advertise nutrition information different from what is in the USDA's National Nutrient Data Bank will be subject to their products being sampled and analyzed so the Food Safety and Inspection Service can establish a nutrient profile.

"The new regulations don't differentiate between meat from animals

raised using different practices," he said. "So if a producer elects to make a special nutritional claim about a [meat](#) product -- such as grass-fed beef -- the claim will have to be backed up with an actual test."

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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