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# Grass-Fed Rule Angers Farmers

By [MARIAN BURROS](#)

THE Agriculture Department has proposed allowing animals to be labeled grass-fed even if they never saw a pasture and were fed antibiotics and hormones.

When Martin E. O'Connor, chief of the standardization branch of the department's livestock and feed program, explained the proposed rule at a conference of the American Grassfed Association in Colorado Springs, Colo., on Friday, members were angry.

Producers of grass-fed animals have waited for years for the department to develop certification standards and procedures, like the organic certification and seal, to distinguish grass-fed animals from conventionally raised animals. When department officials asked for input four years ago, association members replied that the rule should require that an animal be fed on pastures except in emergency circumstances where its life would be threatened, and also that the animal should be free from antibiotics and hormones.

The rule for the voluntary standard that Mr. O'Connor described, which was first announced in May, would require only that the animals be fed a diet that is mother's milk or 99 percent grass, legumes and forage, which is anything taken by browsing or grazing. The rule, which applies to all grass-fed ruminants, including cattle, sheep, goats and bison, is silent on the pasture issue.

"We are pretty close to our customers, and their perception of grass-fed means animals that go from birth to harvest on pasture, not in a feedlot," Dr. Patricia Whisnant, president of the association, said in an interview at the conference. "They also think pasture-raised means no hormones and no antibiotics. The way the rule is written now, producers could simply feed the animals harvested forage in a feedlot and treat them with antibiotics and hormones."

The National Cattlemen's Beef Association agrees with Dr. Whisnant on the confinement issue.

"We know when most consumers think of grass-fed they think of cattle grazing on a pasture, not in a feedlot," said a spokeswoman for the cattle association, Michele Peterson Murray. "We do believe the definition should not mislead consumers."

In an interview, Mr. O'Connor said the department "recognizes there are concerns about confinement." He said he knew "the majority of people envision grass-fed as pasture-raised, and we will consider this." He said officials felt that issues like the confinement of animals and the use of antibiotics and hormones could be taken up in separate rules. Putting them all in the grass-fed rule, he said, "dilutes the meaning of grass-fed."

After Mr. O'Connor's speech, Thom Fox, executive chef of Acme Steakhouse in San Francisco, where grass-fed beef is very popular, said: "You could cut the tension with a knife in that room."

The producers are also concerned that the agency's definition of forage would be so broad that it could include immature corn silage. Corn is a grass but as it matures it forms a cob with kernels: the kernels are a grain. What most distinguishes grass-fed animals from conventionally raised ones is that they are not fed grain, mainly corn.

"We feel that would be a loophole big enough to drive a train through," said Dr. Whisnant, a veterinarian who owns a grass-fed cattle ranch in Missouri. Mr. O'Connor said the definition of immature grain is under review.

Scientists know that feeding cattle grain instead of grass reduces the level of omega-3 fatty acids in the meat. (Omega-3's may prevent heart disease and bolster the immune system.) A report published in March by the [Union of Concerned Scientists](#), an environmental group, said meat from cows fed only grass has higher omega-3 levels than meat from cows raised on grain.

In addition, grass-fed beef is almost always lower in fat than beef from cattle raised conventionally.

Even a local Agriculture Department official at the conference criticized the proposed rule.

"This is not what we perceive of as pasture grazing," said the official, Harvey Sprock, a range management specialist in the agency's natural resources conservation service in Colorado. "We have worked on the standards for grass-fed that the American Grassfed Association sent to U.S.D.A., but what's there now is considerably different from what we proposed. A.G.A. standards would have had real meaning."

Members of the association have begun writing letters to the Agriculture Department criticizing the proposal. The deadline for comments is Aug. 10. E-mail may be sent to [marketingclaim@usda.gov](mailto:marketingclaim@usda.gov) or comments can be made at [www.regulations.gov](http://www.regulations.gov).

Dale Lasater, of the Lasater Ranch in Matheson, Colo., one of the largest grass-fed producers in the country, said in an interview at the conference that it might be better to forget about government certification. "Maybe we shouldn't be fooling around with this rule," he said. "It isn't a law for us; it's for big companies. Maybe we should get our own logo that would mean what we think grass-fed means."

Dr. Whisnant agreed but said, "That takes money, and small farmers don't have money."