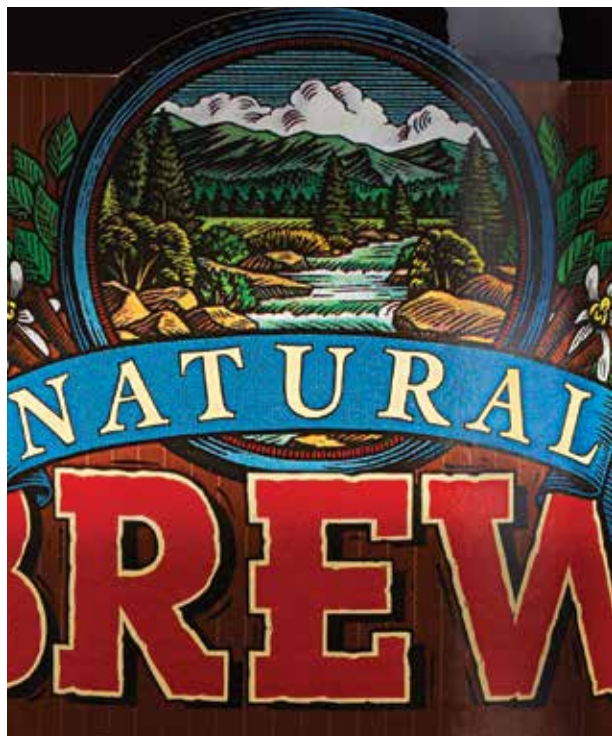


BETWEEN THE LINES

Peeling Back the ‘Natural’ Label

Companies can slap that magic word on processed food packages even if what’s inside contains artificial ingredients. If you find that outrageous, now’s the time to join us in letting the FDA know how you feel.



DO YOU EVER BUY one brand of cereal, chips, or juice over another because you see “natural” on the label and assume it’s better? Sure you do, and you have plenty of company. A recent nationally representative Consumer Reports survey found that more than half of consumers seek out “natural” foods, often in the false belief that they’re produced without genetically modified organisms, hormones, pesticides, or artificial ingredients. In fact, for processed foods, that term has no clear meaning and is not regulated by any agency.

That’s why we petitioned the Food and Drug Administration in 2014 to ban the use of “natural” on labeling so that shoppers aren’t misled. (We have also

asked the Department of Agriculture to ban the use of “natural” on meat and poultry because it is currently not well-defined or meaningful.)

The FDA has responded by asking the public to comment on how the word “natural” should—or should not—be used on food labels, citing Consumer Reports’ petition as one of the reasons it’s taking that important step. The more than 3,600 comments the agency had received when we went to press illustrate the confusion and frustration many people feel when faced with the natural labeling found on store shelves now.

“The use of the word ‘natural’ is a deceptive marketing ploy to reel in unaware consumers. People are led to believe it is the same as ‘organic,’ which it

CONFUSED? NATURALLY!

The need for change is underscored by our latest findings. In December 2015 the Consumer Reports National Research Center conducted a survey of a nationally representative sample of 1,005 adults to get their take on natural labeling. This is a sampling of what they told us:

62% of shoppers said they usually buy foods labeled ‘natural.’

But **nearly two-thirds** believe the natural label means more than it does.

And **nearly half** incorrectly believe that natural claims on labels have been independently verified.

What SHOULD natural mean?

For processed foods, people told us:

85% No chemicals were used during processing.

84% No artificial ingredients or colors.

84% No toxic pesticides.

82% No GMOs.

87% of shoppers who buy foods labeled ‘natural’ said they would pay more if the term met all of their expectations.

Other priorities

The majority of shoppers consider these things important or very important. (Compared with last year, more shoppers considered these things very important.)

91% Supporting local farmers.

89% Reducing exposure to pesticides in foods.

88% Protecting the environment from chemicals.

84% Providing better living conditions for animals.

surely is not,” wrote one Florida resident.

Consumer Reports’ food-safety experts agree; in fact, we have long argued that consumers should not be duped by “natural” labels that currently aren’t backed by meaningful standards. “Ideally, we’d like to see federal regulators ban the natural label, but if they don’t get rid of it, then they must give it real meaning,” says Urvashi Rangan, Ph.D., director of the Consumer Reports Food Safety & Sustainability Center.

What do we believe that should look like? For foods regulated by the FDA, we believe the “natural” label should be reserved for foods that are organic and contain no artificial ingredients. We also believe verification should be required to ensure that foods labeled “natural” truly meet that definition, like the process currently used for the term “organic,” Rangan says.

But some in the food industry oppose labeling changes. For instance, the Grocery Manufacturers Association filed a petition with the FDA arguing that the agency should continue to allow the natural label to be used on products containing GMOs.

That’s why it’s so important for consumers to voice their opinions to government officials. You can sign our updated petition calling for a ban of the term “natural” or for giving it a meaningful definition, at ConsumersUnion.org/natural. We will submit it to the FDA on May 10.



Join our campaign by following #FixNatural on Twitter and Instagram, where you will see a different product every day in February, including the eight shown on the facing page.

A PANDORA'S PACKAGE: WHAT'S INSIDE MAY SURPRISE YOU

These products contain some ingredients that you probably don't think of as natural. We are not asserting that any of the products violate any laws, but we do believe that the government's lack of meaningful standards allows for misleading uses of the natural label.



DEL MONTE FRUIT NATURALS

As you'd expect, these snacks are made with fruits such as peaches, pears, and cherries. But they also contain the artificial preservatives potassium sorbate and sodium benzoate, which are made from industrial chemicals.



ALEXIA SWEET POTATO FRIES

The label says "All Natural." But these fries contain xanthan gum, an ingredient extracted from a "slime" (we're not making that up!) produced from bacteria. Xanthan gum can be used as a thickening agent or to give foods a "fatty mouth feel."



KRAKUS POLISH SLICED HAM

The label says that this ham comes "with Natural Juices." What does that really mean? It's difficult to imagine because the ingredients listed on the packaging (in addition to ham, water, and salt) include five artificial chemicals used in part to cure and preserve the meat.



NATURAL BREW DRAFT ROOT BEER

Its dark-brown shade comes in part from caramel color. We know from our research that certain types of that artificial coloring contain a possibly carcinogenic chemical called 4-methylimidazole (4-Mel). The company would not say what type of caramel color it used. We have petitioned the federal government to set limits for that chemical in food. We don't believe any food additive should elevate people's cancer risk.



TYSON GRILLED & READY FROZEN SOUTHWESTERN CHICKEN BREAST STRIPS

"All natural except for corn syrup solids" appears on the front, but the ingredient list shows that the strips contain corn sweeteners dextrose and maltodextrin. When we asked whether they came from GMO corn, Tyson responded that the government's "natural requirements do not address GMO." The strips also contain citric acid, typically a lab-produced additive derived from bacteria.



KRAFT NATURAL CHEESE

This "natural" cheese contains cellulose powder—a substance typically created when pieces of wood, cotton, or bamboo are cooked in a caustic solution at high temperatures—which is supposed to keep shreds of cheese from sticking together. Kraft did not respond to inquiries about the source of its cellulose powder. And to inhibit mold growth it contains the antifungal natamycin, which is also used as a pesticide.



WESSON VEGETABLE OIL

The bottle displays a "Pure & 100% Natural" claim, but the oil is made from soybeans genetically engineered to withstand herbicides. Oils like this one that are not labeled as "expeller pressed" or "cold pressed" are often made using a solvent called hexane. That process can release n-hexane, which is classified as a hazardous air pollutant by the Environmental Protection Agency, which has identified vegetable-oil production as a major source.