

# What Is Humane Washing & Is Certified Humane Legit?

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## Introduction

As consumers become more aware of the impact of their purchases, they often begin to purchase items that align with their values. In recent years, more consumers have expressed a desire to support eco-conscious and humane initiatives. This spike in consumer interest has led to the implementation of humane certification labels. Common humane labels include “cage free”, “free range”, “grass fed”, and “locally grown.” But what do these labels actually mean? What does a “cage free” farm, by USDA standards, look like? How is it different, if at all, from a factory farm? In this article, we will explore the topic of humane washing and various forms of humane certification.

## What is Humane Washing?

In 2018, Starbucks released plastic lids that no longer required straws, marketed as an effort to make more eco-conscious choices. This announcement quickly evoked positive support, as a large company was aligning with eco-friendly movements by reducing plastic waste. But when taking a closer look, Starbucks’ newly designed lids actually used more plastic than their straws (Surge). This is an example of greenwashing, where an organization releases products aligned with eco-friendly movements, while in reality their practices are not eco-conscious.

We're growing the movement to end factory farming. Sign up for our newsletter to stay up to date on the latest news and to learn more about how to stay involved!

Similar to greenwashing, humane washing is a marketing strategy used by companies to make their products appear more ethical and humane than they may be. Humane washing uses vague or misleading language on product labels and advertisements to create the impression that the product is more humane than it really is. This is done to appeal to the increasing concern for animal welfare and sustainability among consumers, while allowing companies to continue using unethical practices without impacting their profits. For example, a company may use terms like “cage-free” or “free-range” to suggest that their animals are treated well, even if they are still subjected to inhumane conditions.

Humane washing is particularly prevalent in the food industry, where consumers are increasingly concerned about the welfare of animals raised for meat, eggs, and dairy. Companies may use terms like "natural" or "organic" to suggest that their products are more humane, even if they are still produced using the same cruel practices seen in factory farming.

Humane washing also exists outside of the food industry. The infamous "Leaping Bunny" cruelty-free symbol signals to consumers if a beauty product was manufactured without any harm to animals (*Frequently Asked Questions / Leaping Bunny*, n.d.). Leaping Bunny has a standardized process to guarantee the absence of any new animal testing. Yet even as the Leaping Bunny logo is credited as a gold standard for cruelty-free guidelines, many companies with this logo may still use animal products. Companies may also choose to list their own cruelty-free branding on products.

Similar to cruelty-free labeling on food products, these labels for cosmetics and household products are not standardized in the United States or Canada, and can be interpreted widely. Some companies also create their own version of the "Leaping Bunny" logo, with minimal to no regulations to verify their humane practices. Labels such as "cruelty-free," "not tested on animals," or an icon of a rabbit do not guarantee the absence of animal testing, as animal testing could have occurred for any product ingredients, or an external company could have been hired to perform animal testing.

While almost every ingredient in the United States has at one point been tested on animals, there are no laws in the United States which require animal testing for product safety of household products or cosmetics. Because animal testing is not necessary to test the safety of a product, companies have the choice to utilize cruelty-free options. Alternatives for animal testing are advancing and widely available, including clinical human trials, computerized testing, and cell and tissue cultures (*Myths & Facts / Leaping Bunny*, n.d.).

### **Is there such a thing as Humane Meat?**

The concept of "humane meat" is based on the idea that animals can be raised and killed in a way that is both ethical and sustainable. Proponents of humane meat argue that animals should be given access to pasture, be allowed to exhibit natural behaviors, and be killed in a way that minimizes pain and suffering. However the idea of humane meat poses contradictions. **Many argue that even with additions of humane slaughter and healthy living conditions, animals are still being raised and killed for human consumption, which ignores the individuality and inherent value of each individual animal.**

The main criteria for humane labeling considers the environment in which an animal lives, as well as the method by which they are sent to slaughter. The Humane Methods of Slaughter Act was first introduced in 1958, which proposed stunning as a method of humane slaughter. The Act was continually reformed, and affected by the 2002 Farm Bill to further enforce these methods, and track any violations (*Humane Methods of Slaughter Act*, n.d.). Despite bills such as these, there is still no legal definition of the word "humane," and farms are able to individually decide their own practices. "A label of Animal Welfare Approved does not allow debeaking, but considers castration and ear notching without pain relief 'humane'. On the other hand, American Humane Certified permits debeaking, but does not allow ear notching and requires anesthesia for castration of some animals." (HumaneFacts.org, 2022).

The idea of humane meat creates a false dichotomy between "good" and "bad" meat. In reality, all animal agriculture is harmful to animals. Most humans generally do not wish to actively harm animals. However, these misleading humane labels prevent transparency of harmful practices, and lead to consumers continuing to purchase animal products produced in conditions that they oppose. Jay Shooster, legal fellow at Richman Law & Policy, states "...rampant false advertising is leading consumers to buy the exact products they're trying to avoid and taking customers away from businesses that are offering genuine alternatives" (Scott-Reid, 2021).

### **Is Certified Humane Legit?**

Currently, there are no legal definitions through USDA guidelines to define what "humane" or "ethically raised" means. Without a definition of these terms, humane labels are not standardized, and can be widely interpreted by both companies and consumers. "The USDA does require documentation to support the claims, but according to experts, those claims aren't closely scrutinized" (Scott-Reid, 2021). If a company chooses to use humane labels, this process usually involves a written form, and no onsite inspection of the farm from USDA is required.

One of the labels used within animal agriculture is the "Certified Humane" label. This label is owned by the non-profit organization Humane Farm Animal Care (HFAC), which claims to have stringent standards for animal welfare. According to the HFAC website, "The Certified Humane® program is the only animal welfare label requiring the humane treatment of farm animals from birth through slaughter."

In a 2021 survey conducted by Farm Forward, the survey concluded that nearly 50% of consumers visualized chickens living on an open pasture when reading a "cage-free" label. However the reality of the living conditions for most (99%) of chickens and other farmed animals resembles conditions of factory farms (2022). Ultimately, the guidelines for using humane labels are not highly regulated, and do not address the true living conditions of the animals raised on farms. In reality, 99% of all farmed animals are raised on factory farms (Surge).

The United States Food and Drug Administration (FDA) is responsible for regulating cosmetics, drugs, and food products that are sold in the United States. While the USDA regulates most products involving farmed animals, the FDA regulates fish (excluding catfish), chicken's eggs (not powdered or packaged), as well as processed fruits and raw vegetables (The Langel Firm). However, the FDA does not currently have any specific regulations regarding the use of the term "humane" on product labels, nor does the organization have a pre-approval process for food product labels (Nutrition, U.S. Food and Drug Administration).

This lack of regulation has created an opportunity for companies to engage in humane washing, making unsubstantiated claims about the ethical treatment of animals in their products. A growing concern for consumers is the use of the term "natural". According to the FDA, there is no formal definition for the term "natural" used on food labels. The FDA states that while this term is considered to convey products without artificial or synthetic ingredients, "this policy was not intended to address food production methods, such as the use of pesticides, nor did it explicitly address food processing or manufacturing methods, such as thermal technologies, pasteurization, or irradiation. The FDA also did not consider whether the term "natural" should describe any nutritional or other health benefit" (Nutrition, U.S. Food and Drug Administration).

## How to Spot Humane Washing?

In short, humane washing is everywhere. A food ethics study authored by the ASPCA found that 86% of shoppers purposely purchased at least one product displaying a certified humane label. Of these shoppers, “89% did so because they thought the label indicated higher-welfare production practices, and 79% consciously paid more for the product with the label because they thought that the label indicated better-than-standard animal welfare” (Thibault et al., 2022).

How can we spot humane washing at our local grocery store? There are so many different labels with various meanings, which poses challenges for conscious consumers seeking humane choices. When approached with labels such as “free-range,” the choice is left up to the consumer of how they interpret this imagery. Humane labels are intentionally deceptive for this reason, to allow consumers to imagine the ideal conditions of the animals from their company.

When examining labels, it is important to be cautious when presented with vague statements. If a company claims to prioritize animal welfare, but doesn't provide any details about how they do so, it may be a sign that they're more interested in appearing ethical than actually making a meaningful impact. Consumers should be wary of companies that use images of happy or healthy-looking animals in their advertising or packaging. While these images may be appealing, they do not necessarily provide true insight into the company's practices or policies.

Ultimately, the best way to avoid falling victim to humane washing is to research companies, read product labels carefully, and support companies that are transparent and truly committed to animal welfare. While at the store, consumers can utilize mobile apps including [Buycott](#) or [Leaping Bunny's Cruelty-Free](#) app to scan products and view a company's practices in real time. Plant-based products also serve as an option for consumers seeking cruelty-free choices.

## Why is False Advertising Bad For Animals?

Labels depicting positive images may appear to be harmless marketing strategies, however, there are serious consequences in the emergence of these labels. Organizations such as the Animal Legal Defense Club consider many of these labels to be “misleading, illegal conduct” (2019). Companies within animal agriculture are aware of the spending habits of consumers. The expectations of most consumers in the United States have changed, where they increasingly seek out humane labels to affirm their purchases. Because companies are aware of consumer desire for humane products, any animal agriculture business is more likely to alter their branding to support humane imagery rather than change their operating procedures. For this reason, humane washing is dangerous to animals on farms, as they endure the same conditions on “cage free” or “free range” farms as they would on a standard factory farm, but consumers feel less alarmed and more desensitized about farming practices.

## Conclusion

Humane washing is prevalent in the United States, and introduces issues of product transparency and animal welfare standards. Companies use humane washing tactics to appeal to the rising consumer interest in ethical treatment of animals, but only change the packaging of their product rather than their systems of operation. This leads to consumers purchasing products they morally oppose, typically at a higher price tag. While humane washing is widespread, it is a direct result of individual buying power. As consumers, we have power in our individual choices, whether we

choose to be selective in the labels we support or opt for plant-based choices. These purchases communicate our desires to grocery stores, which can lead to substantial change. One way to oppose humane washing is to remain aware of common marketing strategies, and refrain from purchasing products using humane washing wherever possible.

While individual changes are impactful in directing consumer demand, overall policy change will be instrumental in removing humane washing tactics, and by consequence will improve the lives of animals used in factory farms. “Real policy change, with consumers and animals in mind, is needed to rein in America’s humane washing problem” (Scott-Reid, 2021). Consumer protection laws can be a useful tool for addressing humane washing, but will still require enforcement, which has lacked across the board for most regulation processes (Jacobs). Humane washing directly harms animals subjected to factory farming, and removes transparency about the true company practices. Removing these misleading labels and campaigns would allow consumers to make informed decisions, and hopefully lead to truly humane conditions for all individuals affected by factory farming.

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