

Labels – What can you believe?

By Betsy Hodge

A new farmer recently asked me to explain some of the labels he has heard tossed around by farmers and others in agribusiness. There are many claims out there but only a few are certifiable and many are not provable even with testing. That doesn't mean you should ignore the labels, just be sure to ask lots of questions so you know what you are getting when buying breeding stock or even locally grown meat.

Johnes Free, OPP Free, Scrapie Free and Foot Rot Free - These are all diseases that can be tested for but not with certainty. If a farmer tests her flock regularly and works with a veterinarian then she can say that her flock has *not tested positive* for OPP or Johnes or Scrapie but they can't say for sure that it doesn't exist in their flock. I am reasonably sure our Extension flock is Johnes free because I have been working with the flock for almost 30 years and have never had a case. However, I can't claim that they are Johnes free because I can't really test for it reliably. The test will only show positive results when the sheep are already shedding the organism (but could be carrying the disease which doesn't show up until animals are about 4 years old). On the other hand, at home I have purchased ewes that appeared very healthy and then lost several to Johnes. The farmer that sold them to me did not know about Johnes so assumed a few ewes had died from parasites. He wasn't being dishonest but didn't really know what was happening.

There are programs for testing for OPP with the aim of helping you get OPP out of your flock if you already have it. The program takes dedication! You can definitely reduce the incidence of OPP in the flock by following the program but it would be hard to be sure you actually OPP free.

<http://www.oppociety.org>

The USDA had a scrapie certification program that included monitoring flocks for five years and if no scrapie shows up and no cull animals test positive you were considered scrapie free. Even that was no guarantee. However, at least you knew the flock owner had been educated about scrapie and was watching for it. There are still scrapie certification programs for those that want to export animals. See the info at https://www.aphis.usda.gov/aphis/ourfocus/animalhealth/animal-disease-information/sheep-and-goat-health/national-scrapie-eradication-program/ct_scrapie_home.

Foot rot is tricky because there can be a carrier in the group of sheep or goats and the group you buy will appear to be foot rot free and then infect the rest of your flock. I don't believe there is a test for foot rot so this one is a challenge to avoid. If you have it in the flock it can be hard to get rid of until you cull the carrier. There is no good way to find the carrier.

“Bio secure” and “closed flock” are terms sometimes bandied about. Bio-secure most likely means that the farmer makes visitors wear plastic over-boots and takes other precautions to keep their farm from getting contaminated with possible pathogens. A closed flock is one that hasn't brought in any stock from other farms for a certain amount of time. At some point they are likely to use a buck or ram from another flock to avoid inbreeding so ask questions. Being a closed flock does not mean they are healthy.

Grass fed really means forage fed. The flock or herd is fed only forages with no grain. Sometimes farmers expand on that and say grass finished. This is usually mentioned in regards to meat. You might even see grass fed, grain finished. The USDA grass-fed certification has been withdrawn but the rules

are still at the website (<https://www.ams.usda.gov/services/auditing/grass-fed-SVS>). Some consumers find grass fed desirable. Having a grass fed flock requires very high quality forages and the right genetics in your animals.

Antibiotic Free – An animal that has never been treated with antibiotics or fed low levels in the feed for growth can be called antibiotic free. Sick animals in the flock can still be treated with antibiotics when sick but then can not be marketed as antibiotic free.

Hormone Free – You can not claim that your animals are hormone free. They have naturally occurring hormones. You could claim “no added hormones” but not hormone free.

Organic – Organic means you follow USDA organic practices and are certified by a certifying agency like NOFA-NY (<https://www.nofany.org/>). Technically you can't sell the meat as organic unless it is processed in an organic slaughterhouse. The regulations can be viewed at <https://www.ams.usda.gov/grades-standards/organic-standards>.

There are other claims like “**Selected for Parasite Resistance**”. Ask what that means....does it mean they never de-worm and whatever survives is bound to be parasite resistant or does that mean they FAMACHA score all their sheep regularly and use that and fecal egg counts to select replacements? It is a great trait to select for but also no guarantee that the sheep or goats will be parasite resistant in your management system.

One last tip for purchasing breeding stock...try to find animals that come from a farm that manages their animals the way you plan to manage yours. If you pasture your stock, look for animals from a pastured flock. If you plan to show in a serious way, look for animals from show flocks, etc.

Most shepherds and goat owners are honest and will tell you what they know about their animals. However, it is a good idea to observe the flock and ask about production records and health challenges. What about sore mouth, prolapses, abortions, etc. What one person considers normal could be another's outbreak! Ask about diets and minerals and vaccinations. Do your best to select good stock from established farms where the farmer will help you if you run into trouble.