

Although many producers and consumers share emerging principles with regard to farm animal welfare, the different programs, standards and marketing claims can be confusing. Over the last several years Whole Foods Market has convened meetings with a global group of stakeholders and experts to vet production standards for the majority of the animal species from which organic products are obtained.

The result is a 5-tiered animal welfare rating system that rates livestock production systems on a scale of 1-5, on a species-specific basis. The Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) recently approved a label that incorporates the Whole Foods Market's 5-Step™ Animal Welfare Rating system and has authorized its use by producers that have been verified as meeting the requirements of a particular step or level. The rating program will soon be donated to and implemented by a new global not-for-profit entity called the Global Animal Partnership™. The Global Animal Partnership™ will provide animal welfare education, research, and a verified labeling program for producers to use that will provide consumers a clear and transparent way to make informed buying decisions based solely on animal welfare considerations.

The welfare standards embodied in the 5-Step™ Animal Welfare Rating system are particularly appropriate for consideration by the National Organic Standards Board as they are extensions of Sections 205.236 – 239 of the NOP. Not only are the consumers that are driving the development of these standards in the marketplace typically consumers of organic animal products, their interest in greater transparency regarding the treatment of farm animals is entirely consistent with the principles and transparency that are the foundation of the organic regulations. The ratings system also directly incorporates continual improvement by rewarding those producers that improve their practices with a higher rating.

Congress put the organic community on the path to developing its own organic-specific farm animal production practices in 1990 when the OFPA authorized USDA to hold hearings on organic animal rearing standards before adopting rules. Those hearings produced the first steps towards a comprehensive organic animal rearing approach. The mandate of that special authorization and ever increasing consumer driven demand for animal welfare in organic livestock production has created the opportunity for the NOSB and the organic community to take the next step regarding animal welfare standards/conditions in the NOP. The federal organic standards will benefit from explicit consideration of the new literature on farm animal well being, an updated record on consumer expectations, and the work product embodied in the 5-Step™ Animal Welfare rating system.