



Agricultural Marketing Service

Understanding Food Quality Labels

A Guide to AMS Grade Shields, Value-Added Labels, and Official Seals

USDA's Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS) provides American agriculture with valuable tools and services, such as grading, certification, and verification, that help create marketing opportunities. Through these services we guarantee the quality of American food and add value to American products. Below is a list of the labels and standards AMS verifies.



Grade & Quality Labels for Dairy Products



Grade AA, A or B

Type: Consumer

Status: In use since 1947

This shield applies to butter and cheeses that have United States grade standards. These standards are based on measurable attributes, such as flavor, body, and texture that describe the value and utility of the product. USDA must grade the butter and cheese in the final package. The designated grade could be AA, A, or B. Currently, AA is only used for butter.



U.S. Extra Grade

Type: Processor/Industry

Status: In use since 1952

This shield applies to dairy products, such as non-fat dry milk and bulk American cheese, that have grade designations other than letters. Any product with this label attached would have to be graded prior to the product leaving the control of the manufacturing facility.



USDA Quality Approved

Type: Processor/Industry

Status: In use since 1952

This shield is applied to any dairy product package that does not have an established United States grade standard. This shield could be used on margarine or a non-standardized cheese, and reflects USDA's evaluation of flavor, body, texture, and other quality attributes. Any product with this label attached would have to be graded prior to the product leaving the control of the manufacturing facility.

Grade & Quality Labels for Fruits, Vegetables, and Specialty Crops



Continuous Inspection Grades

Type: Packer/Industry

Status: In use since 1973

The Continuous Inspection Grades and Inspection Marks are for use by plants operating under USDA continuous inspection contracts for processed fruits and vegetables. The grade mark would indicate the quality level of the product. The designated grade could be Grade A (shown left) or Grade B (shown right).



Continuous Inspection Marks

Type: Packer/Industry

Status: In use since 1956

The Continuous Inspection Marks are for use by plants operating under USDA continuous inspection contracts. No grade is designated, and the statement may be used inside a shield (shown left) or without the use of an emblem or shield (shown right).

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Inspection Grades

Type: Packer/Industry

Status: In use since 1956

Inspection Grades are for use by plants operating under USDA inspection service contracts. The grade mark indicates the quality level of the product. The Grade A shield is typically tri-colored in blue, white, and red from top to bottom.



Inspection Marks

Type: Packer/Industry

Status: In use since 1956

Inspection Marks are for use by plants operating under USDA inspection service contracts. They are used without a grade, and can be used with the shield (shown left) and without the shield (shown right).

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Quality Assurance Program (QAP)

Type: Packer/Industry

Status: In use since 1976

The Quality Assurance Program (QAP) shield is used to designate participation in the QAP service. The facility under contract is operated with USDA oversight, their quality control program is reliable, and capable of producing sound and wholesome product of the desired quality under sanitary conditions.

Grade & Quality Labels for Fruits, Vegetables, and Specialty Crops (continued)

**Processed Product Inspection Marks**

Type: Processor/Industry
Status: In use since 1983

This inspection mark is for processed products produced in an approved plant and inspected and certified by an inspector on a lot basis. They are used without a grade, and can be used with the shield (shown left) and without the shield (shown right).

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**Processed Product Grade Marks**

Type: Processor/Industry
Status: In use since 1956

Inspection Grade and Inspection marks indicate the processed fruits and vegetable products have been produced in an approved plant and inspected and certified by an inspector on a lot basis. The grade mark indicates the quality level of the product. Grades are typically Grade A, B, or C.

**Sampling Marks**

Type: Processor/Industry
Status: In use since 1955

Official sampling marks identify products that have been officially sampled by a particular field office indicated by a code mark identifying the field office performing the sampling.

**Graded Product Packed Under Continuous Inspection**

Type: Packer/Industry
Status: In use since 1956

The approved shield with the appropriate U.S. grade designation may be used on containers, labels, or other packaging. Usage is when the product is packed under continuous inspection by the USDA inspection service, the plant in which the product is packed is maintained under good commercial sanitary practices and the product has been certified by an inspector as meeting the requirements of the U.S. Grade A, Grade No. 1 or a higher designated grade.



PACKED BY

 UNDER CONTINUOUS
 FEDERAL-STATE
 INSPECTION

Continuous Inspection by Federal-State Licensed Employees

Type: Packer/Industry
Status: In use since 1956

A federal-state licensed employee uses the following shields in facilities packing under continuous inspection, and the product meets a U.S. Grade of No. 1. Two examples of shields with packer identification numbers are provided here.



PACKER NO. 01
 PACKED UNDER CONTINUOUS
 FEDERAL-STATE INSPECTION

Grade & Quality Labels for Fruits, Vegetables, and Specialty Crops (continued)



Fresh Produce Inspected Lots

Type: Packer/Industry
Status: In use since 1956

Fresh produce that is inspected on a lot-by-lot basis is identified by the official inspection mark. The mark is stamped on a container.



Qualified Through Verification (QTV)

Type: Consumer/Industry
Status: In use since 1997

The Qualified Through Verification (QTV) shield is used to designate participation in the QTV program. The QTV program is a food safety based program with a foundation of Hazard Analysis Critical Control Point (HACCP) principles, Good Manufacturing Practices (GMP's), AMS's "Good Agricultural Practices" and "Good Handling Practices" (GAP and GHP) Verification, effective sanitation programs, product recall planning, and microbiological testing.



Quality Monitoring Program (QMP)

Type: Consumer
Status: In use since 2007

The Quality Monitoring Program (QMP) logo is used to designate participation in the QMP. QMP provides a supplier with an objective, third party assessment of the product's quality. These evaluations may be based on official U.S. grade standards or customer quality specifications.



Partners in Quality (PIQ)

Type: Packer/Processor/Industry
Status: In use since 1997

The Partners in Quality (PIQ) shield designates a client's participation in programs that USDA licensed personnel audit. Auditors document intensive systems used by packinghouses to ensure the quality of the commodities passing through them.



Identity Preservation (IP)

Type: Processor/Industry
Status: In use since 2008

The Identity Preservation (IP) Program logo is used by clients that are enrolled in the IP Program. It is used to verify client claims about certain unique values of a product.



Good Agricultural Practices (GAP) and Good Handling Practices (GHP)

Type: Packer/Processor/Industry
Status: In use since 2007

This logo is used to designate participation in Specialty Crop Good Agricultural Practices (GAPs) and Good Handling Practices (GHP) audit programs.

USDA Certified Organic



Organic Seal

Type: Consumer/Processor/Industry

Status: In use since 2002

Organic certification verifies that farms and businesses comply with the USDA organic regulations and allows businesses to sell, label, and represent their products as organic. There are three distinct labeling categories for organic products:

- 100 Percent Organic - Agricultural products in the “100 percent organic” category contain only ingredients that are certified organic, including any processing aids.
- Organic - Agricultural products in the “organic” category must contain no less than 95 percent of certified organic ingredients (excluding salt and water). The remaining five percent of ingredients must be organically produced, unless commercially unavailable or allowed on the National List.
- “Made With” Organic - Multi-ingredient agricultural products in the “made with” category contain at least 70 percent certified organic ingredients (excluding salt and water). Any remaining agricultural products are not required to be organically produced, but must be produced without excluded methods – for example, genetic engineering.

Grades for Poultry



Grade Shield

Type: Consumer

Status: In use since 1976

USDA poultry grading is a voluntary service paid for by poultry producers. As an independent third party, USDA is recognized for assuring that poultry meet the U.S. grade standards. While there are other grades, Grade A is the most common grade sold in supermarkets. What makes poultry products qualify for Grade A depends on the absence of “defects,” such as the presence of feathers or bruising and discoloration. As poultry is graded, it either meets Grade A criteria for quality or it is downgraded to lesser grades (B & C) depending on the number of defects.

Grades for Eggs



Shell Egg Grades

Type: Consumer

Status: In use since 1963

USDA shell egg grading is a voluntary service paid for by shell egg producers. As an independent third party, USDA is recognized for assuring that eggs meet the U.S. grade standards for quality and sanitary processing. Eggs are categorized into one of three consumer grades:

- Grade AA – The freshest and highest quality eggs will receive a Grade AA.
- Grade A – Very high quality eggs will receive a Grade A.
- Grade B – Grade B eggs are usually used for breaking stock (liquid eggs) and baking, depending on the number of defects.

Grade & Quality Labels for Beef



Beef Grades

Type: Consumer

Status: In use since 1927

The USDA grade shields are highly regarded as symbols of high-quality American beef. Quality grades are widely used as a “language” within the beef industry, making business transactions easier and providing a vital link to support rural America. Beef grades include:

- Prime – Prime beef is produced from young, well-fed beef cattle. It has abundant marbling (the amount of fat interspersed with lean meat), and is generally sold in restaurants and hotels.
- Choice – Choice beef is high quality, but has less marbling than Prime.
- Select – Select beef is very uniform in quality and normally leaner than the higher grades. It is fairly tender, but because it has less marbling, it may lack some of the juiciness and flavor of the higher grades.
- Standard and Commercial – Standard and Commercial grades of beef are frequently sold as ungraded or as store brand meat. Utility, Cutter, and Canner grades of beef are seldom, if ever, sold at retail. Instead they are used to make ground beef and processed products.



Tender & Very Tender Shields

Type: Consumer

Status: In use since 2012

USDA Certified Tender or Very Tender is a marketing program that aids consumers in making decisions on which beef cuts to purchase, and allows beef processors to market products as USDA Certified Tender or Very Tender. In order to become qualified to carry the Tender or Very Tender label, wholesalers or retailers are required to have certain beef muscles pass a slice shear force test that determines the tenderness of the muscle and associated muscles.



Process Control Certification Program

Type: Industry

Status: In use since 2001

This program is intended to add value to processed, donated red meat commodities through audit based process control. One AMS agent per shift will be required to monitor the PCCP operations of the entire production facility. The PCCP emblem may be used in advertising and promotional literature for finished goods distributed to States or State school systems, as well as commercial products produced with AMS Verification.

Additional Quality Labels for Livestock, Egg, and Poultry



Process Verified Program

Type: Consumer/Industry

Status: In use since 2005

Built upon the ISO 9001 Quality Management Systems Standard, Process Verified Programs (PVP) involve a comprehensive quality management system review, which allow companies to market their products using the USDA PVP shield. The PVP allows companies to develop their own marketing claims, such as a feeding claim, or use an established standard such as Never Ever 3 (never ever given hormones, antibiotics, or animal byproducts).

Additional Quality Labels for Livestock, Egg, and Poultry



Accepted as Specified

Type: Industry

Status: In use since the 1960s

Under the certification service, meat, poultry and egg products are officially accepted as specified by AMS employees according to detailed specification requirements. These services ensure that volume buyers receive products that meet their specifications and comply with contractual requirements. These services also fill various market niches requiring export certification or various foreign country requirements.

Plant Variety Protection



PVP Seal

Type: Industry/Academia

Status: In use since 1970

Used only on Plant Variety Protection certificates which are issued by USDA. Similar to a patent, but verifies plant varieties.