

Opinion: Animal welfare labels are a hollow money-maker for supermarkets

June 21 2024, by Lindsay Hamilton



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The 200-year-old Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, the oldest such charity in the world, is under fire for endorsing welfare standards on [RSPCA Assured](#) farms investigated by Animal

Rising activists. More than 40 of these farms, [the group alleges](#), contain dead or dying animals existing in unacceptable conditions.

An RSPCA Assured spokesperson is [reported](#) to have said an investigation is underway and that welfare breaches on accredited farms are rare.

The RSPCA Assured [scheme](#) labels meat and dairy from farms subject to routine inspections by RSPCA-trained assessors. The charity [claims](#) that it strives to improve the welfare and quality of life of farmed animals by advocating for an end to cages, enriched living conditions and humane transport and slaughter. The RSPCA also provokes consumers to reflect on food purchases, particularly cheap meat, because it often comes at the price of [animal welfare](#).

An increasing number of consumers [care](#) about the consequences of what they eat. Consumer [research](#) indicates that food with animal welfare labels is typically more expensive and identifies two types of consumer: those who seek to buy ethically and will pay this premium and those who prioritize affordability and typically won't. Animal Rising's investigation of UK farms accredited by the RSPCA Assured scheme is of particular concern to the former.

Footage obtained by Animal Rising appears to show routine mistreatment of farmed animals, calling animal welfare certification schemes into question. Welfare organizations like Compassion in World Farming have argued that unannounced [farm](#) visits are a better way to root out [food producers](#) flouting the welfare standards that [consumers expect](#).

Labels on food sold in supermarkets carry weight with consumers. Marketing experts have shown how [labels](#) including Freedom Food and RSPCA Assured remain attractive to retailers because they increase sales

from consumers who place their trust in them and pay extra as a result. These labels work as "brand extensions" that extend the consumer's positive associations with animal welfare charities to the labeled product.

Many shoppers struggle to understand what the badges on their food actually mean. The recent exposé by Animal Rising will only confuse matters further.

What price ethics?

Consumers are torn between affordability and [animal welfare](#). Many eventually give up meat and dairy altogether. Some scholars would argue this is the right choice, given the impossibility of avoiding [exploitation](#) altogether in what they call the [animal-industrial complex](#).

For Animal Rising activists, vegans and many others, the continuing adoption of welfare food labels is a strategy of appeasement that protects livestock producers and retailers instead of raising animal welfare standards.

Scrutinizing schemes like RSPCA Assured should not be the sole responsibility of activists, but instead, the subject of rigorous public debate. If, as research suggests, there are links between food labels and what consumers are willing to pay for guarantees of higher welfare standards, then it is not only a question of ethics but [trust as well](#).

Organizations with accreditation schemes must be made to demonstrate their value. Only then can customers make informed choices about what they buy.

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