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Holding Companies Accountable: Humanewashing, Antibiotics, and Animal Welfare

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Summary

Amid increasing scrutiny of the meat industry for its impacts on climate change, animal welfare, antibiotic resistance, and public health, Data for Progress and Farm Forward [conducted](#) a survey investigating Americans' views on their food and the actions of companies that produce it. This survey reveals that a significant portion of Americans are concerned about the accuracy of food marketing, particularly with respect to antibiotic usage in animal products.

[Marketing and product labeling](#) are two key ways the meat industry attempts to downplay its impacts and to convince the public that its products are more benign than they really are. This phenomenon, promoting the illusion of exceptional animal treatment and practices while masking the industrial conditions under which animals are raised and slaughtered, is called [humanewashing](#). This report explores Americans' knowledge of and expectations for meat labeling, support for transparency and regulation of meat industry marketing around issues like antibiotic usage, and the extent to which common industry marketing misleads the public.

Key Findings

- These findings reveal that a significant portion of American adults are concerned about where their food comes from (69% “very concerned” or “somewhat concerned”).
 - Adults' top concerns include companies misrepresenting their animal welfare practices (25%), overcharging consumers for products with misleading labels (25%), and engaging in inhumane animal welfare practices (19%).
- A majority of respondents (62%) agree with the claim that grocery stores selling animal products with labels like “antibiotic-free” and Animal Welfare Certified should be subject to regular testing and reporting to ensure products meet the standards they claim they do.
 - Additionally, the overwhelming majority of adults support mandatory labeling of antibiotic usage (87%), while nearly three-fourths of adults (71%) would lose trust in their grocery store if they discovered that products marketed as raised without antibiotics actually contained antibiotic residues.
- While animal product labels, like “cage-free” and “organic,” are generally viewed favorably, nearly half of Americans (49%) are skeptical about “humane” or “ethically raised” food labels on animal products, believing they are often misleading about companies' practices around animal welfare.

- After respondents learn more about food labeling in the meat industry, their skepticism around animal product labels increases to 65%.
- After being shown a picture of a chicken farm marketed as Animal Welfare Certified (AWC), half of respondents say the operation either meets their expectations for the AWC label “not very well” (30%) or “not at all” (20%).

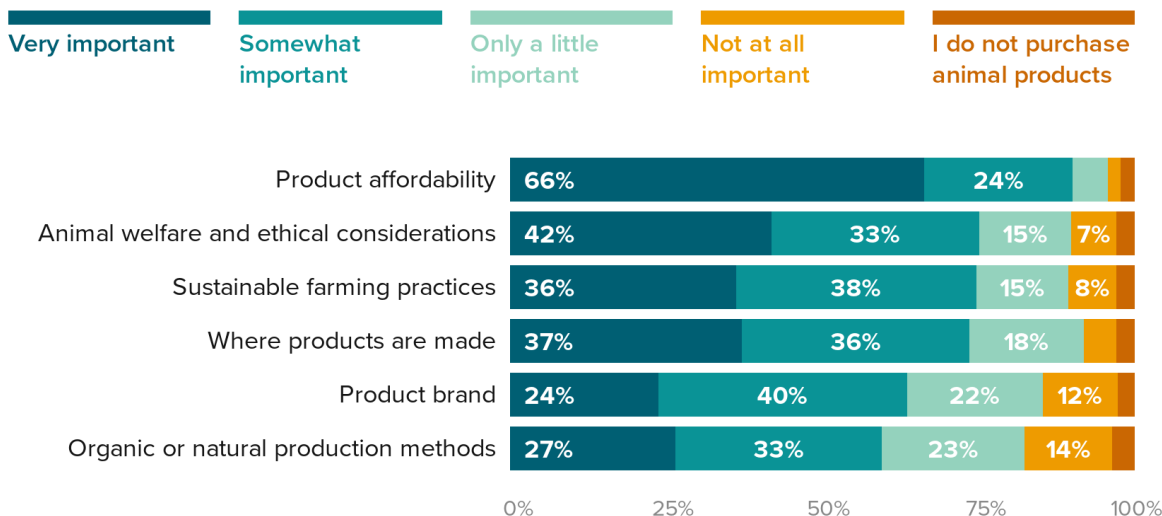
Read the full details of the polling in the report below.

American Views on Humanewashing, Food Products, and Animal Welfare

An initial inquiry into purchasing decisions reveals that affordability is of top importance for American adults, and is consistently the most important factor across all demographic groups. Behind affordability, animal welfare, sustainable farming practices, and where products are made are ranked as similarly important to respondents, while organic production methods and product brand are less important for determining purchasing decisions than other factors.

Affordability and Animal Welfare Are Among Top Considerations for Animal Product Purchases

When making decisions about what **animal products** you purchase, please rank how important each of the following factors are to you:



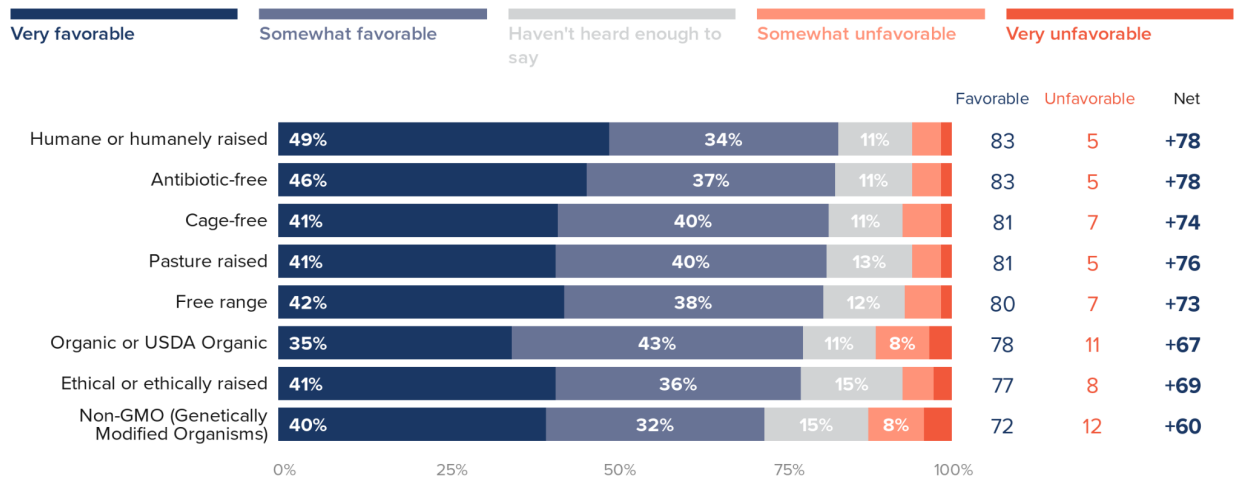
June 23-25, 2023 survey of 1,149 U.S. adults



Despite many food labels [lacking enforceable, rigorous U.S. Department of Agriculture \(USDA\) guidelines](#) governing their usage on meat and egg products, Americans view all generic food labels tested favorably. Americans consider “humane or humanely raised” and “antibiotic-free” the net most favorable general food labels, followed closely by “cage free” and “pasture raised.”

Americans View All Food Labels Tested Favorably, With "Humane or Humanely Raised" and "Antibiotic-Free" the Most Favorable

Do you have a favorable or unfavorable opinion of the following labels?



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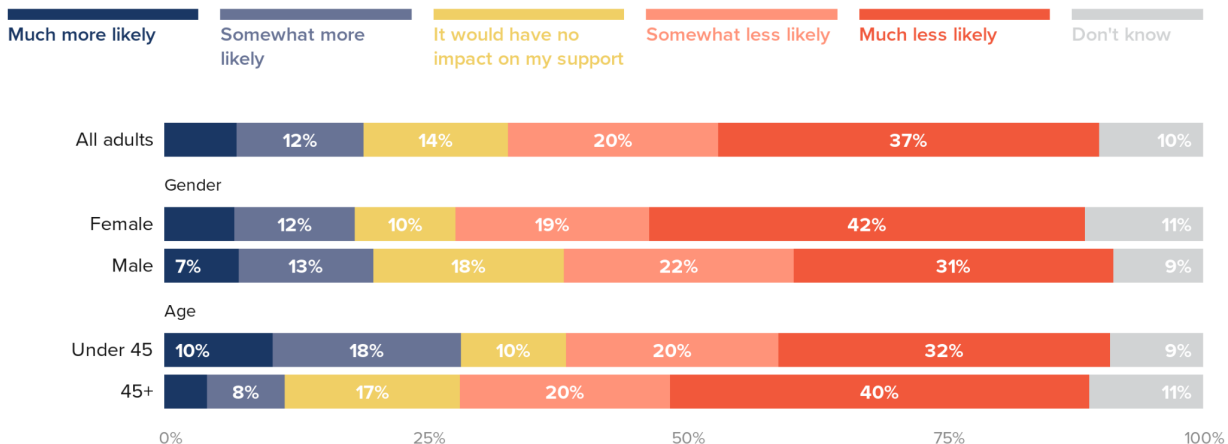


After reading a definition of humanewashing, including the example of “raising farmed animals in confinement,” a majority of adults (57%) say learning that a company engaged in humanewashing would make them “somewhat less likely” or “much less likely” to support that brand.

After Reading a Definition of Humanewashing, a Majority of Adults Say Learning That a Company Engaged in Humanewashing Would Make Them Less Likely to Support That Brand

Humanewashing refers to companies promoting themselves and the animal products they sell as ethical or humane, while engaging in practices that may contradict those claims, such as raising farmed animals in confinement.

Would learning that a company or grocery store engaged in humanewashing make you more or less likely to support their brand?



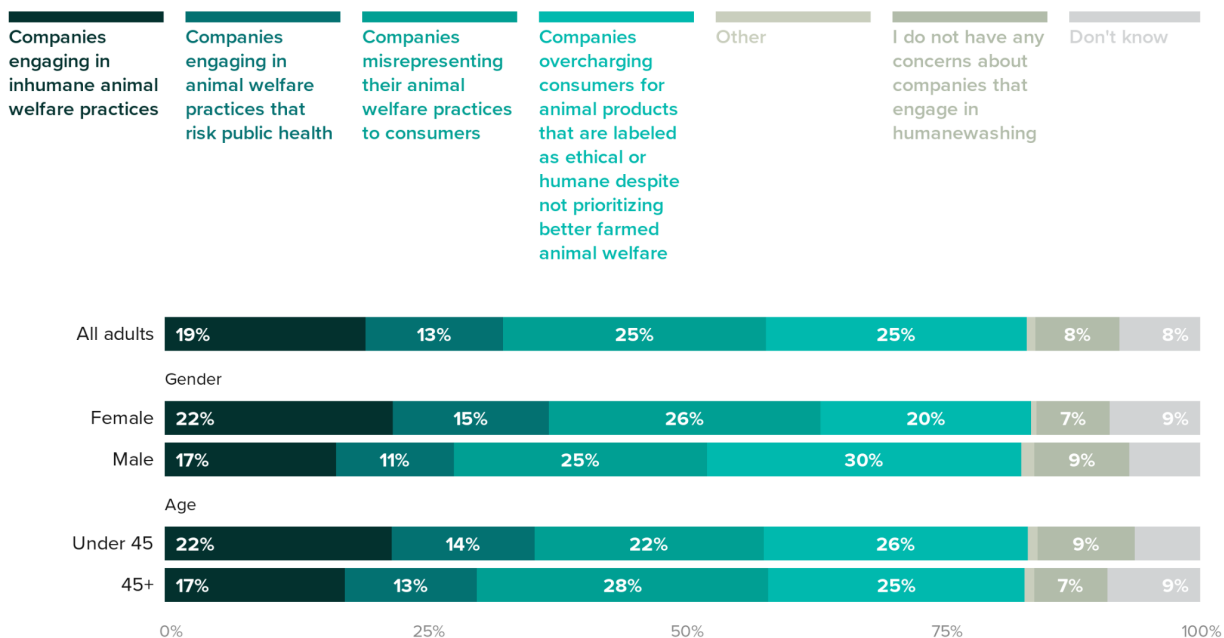
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When it comes to concerns around companies engaging in humanewashing, Americans’ top worries relate to the ethics of the practice. Adults are equally concerned that companies are misrepresenting their animal welfare practices (25%) and overcharging for products labeled as ethical despite not prioritizing animal welfare (25%), while 19% cite companies engaging in inhumane animal welfare practices as their top concern.

After Reading a Definition of Humanewashing, Adults Are Concerned That Companies Are Overcharging Consumers, Misrepresenting Their Animal Welfare Practices, and Engaging in Inhumane Animal Treatment

Humanewashing refers to companies promoting themselves and the animal products they sell as ethical or humane, while engaging in practices that may contradict those claims.

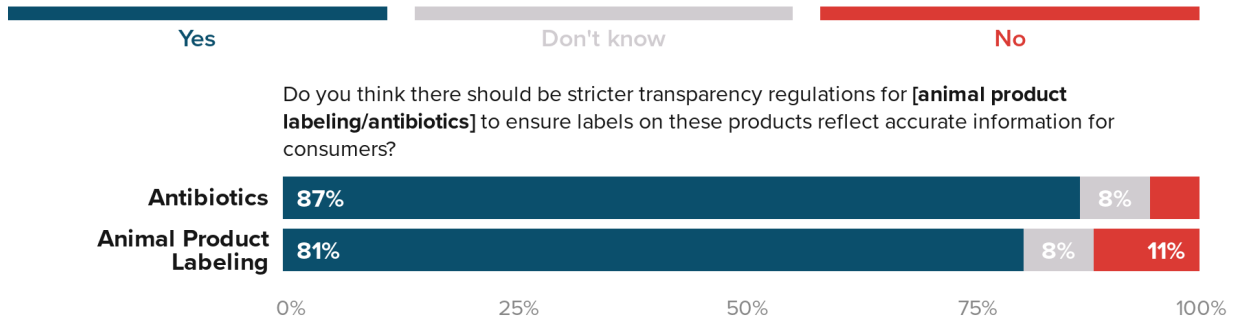
Which of the following, if any, is your biggest concern about companies that engage in humanewashing?



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An overwhelming majority of Americans (88%) say it is “very important” (57%) or “somewhat important” (31%) that companies provide transparent and independently verified information about their animal welfare practices. When asked specifically about regulations for animal product labeling, 81% support increasing the strictness of these regulations, compared with only 11% who say existing regulations are sufficient. Stricter transparency regulations for antibiotic labeling on meat products are also widely popular, with 87% of American adults in support.

A Majority of Adults Believe There Should Be Stricter Labeling Requirements for Both Antibiotics and Animal Product Labeling



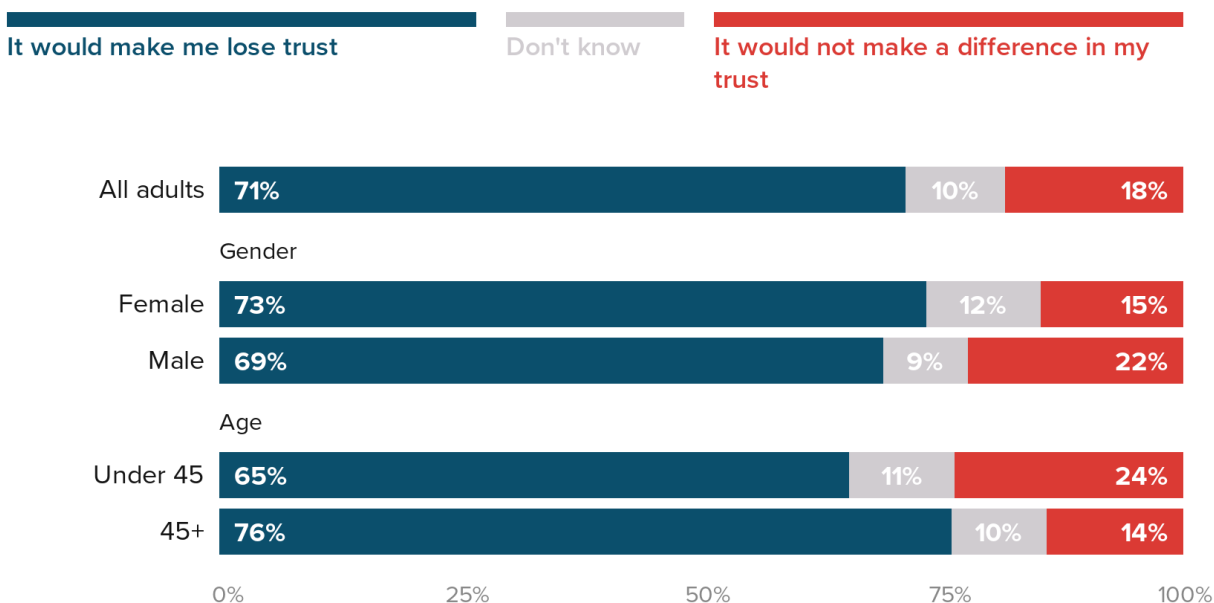
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Food labels are supposed to help individuals make informed decisions about the products and brands they purchase. After reading that independent testing of Whole Foods meat products marketed as “raised without antibiotics,” Animal Welfare Certified, and USDA Organic revealed evidence of an antibiotic drug in an animal product, 71% of respondents say it would make them lose trust in their grocery store if it was discovered to be selling products treated with antibiotic drugs, yet marketed these products as having been raised without antibiotics.

False Labeling Makes a Majority of Adults Lose Trust in Their Grocery Store

Recently, independent testing of meat products at Whole Foods marketed as "raised without antibiotics," Animal Welfare Certified, and USDA Organic revealed evidence of an antibiotic drug in an animal product.

If **your grocery store** advertised meat products with these labels, but these products were discovered to have been treated with antibiotic drugs, would that make you lose trust in the store, or would it not make a difference in your trust?



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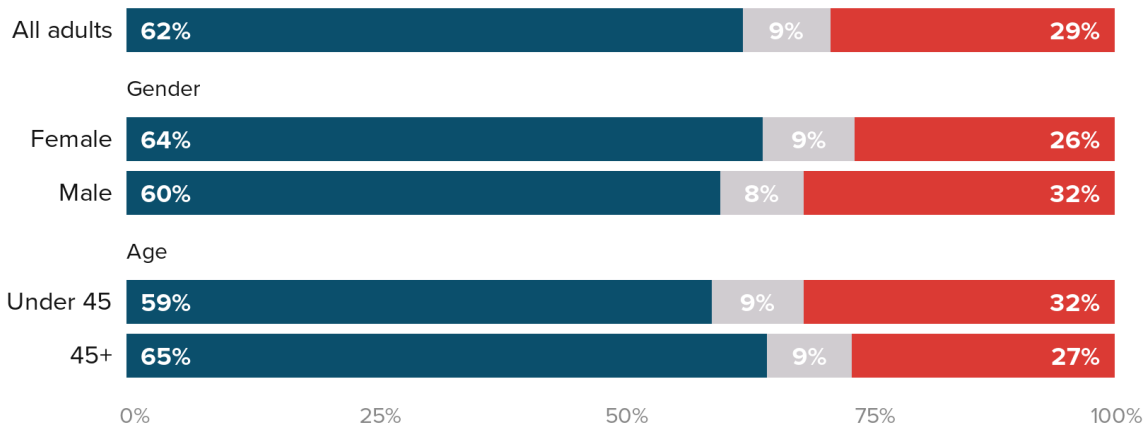
A majority of Americans (62%) agree with the claim that grocery stores selling animal products with labels like “antibiotic-free” and Animal Welfare Certified should be subject to regular testing and reporting to ensure products meet the standards they claim they do, while 29% agree with the claim that grocery stores can only do so much to control for their supply chains and account for upstream antibiotic usage.

Most Adults Believe That Grocery Stores Should Be Subject to Regular Testing to Ensure Food Labels Are Accurate

Recently, independent testing of meat products at Whole Foods marketed as "antibiotic-free," Animal Welfare Certified, and USDA Organic revealed evidence of an antibiotic drug in an animal product.

Which of these statements best describes your view, even if neither is exactly right?

<p>Grocery stores that sell animal products with these labels should be subject to regular testing and reporting to ensure their products actually meet the standards they claim they do.</p>	<p>Don't know</p>	<p>There is only so much that grocery stores can do to control their supply chains and companies can't be expected to know if trace amounts of antibiotics may be in their animal products.</p>
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Respondents are considerably more skeptical about the claims of animal product labels with regards to animal welfare after being exposed to the information throughout this survey. Nearly two-thirds (65%) say they are skeptical of these labels and think they are often misleading, compared with 49% earlier in the survey, a 16-point increase in respondents who agree with this stance.

After Being Informed About the Issues Surrounding Food Labels, Adults Are Considerably More Skeptical About Label Claims

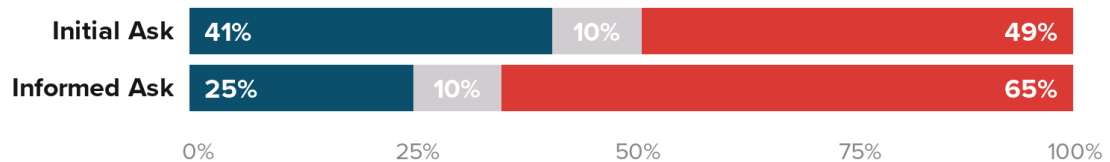
I believe these labels accurately reflect when companies engage in practices to prioritize better animal welfare.

Don't know

I'm skeptical about these labels and think they are often misleading about companies' practices around animal welfare.

When you purchase animal products, like eggs or meat, you may see labels that say the product is "humane" or "ethically raised."

Which of these statements best describes what you think about animal products labeled with these terms, even if neither is exactly right?



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Conclusion

These results suggest that there is a growing public demand for transparency and accountability in food labeling, and that companies engaging in humanewashing risk losing consumer trust and support. Throughout the report, respondents stress the importance of companies ensuring that their claims about animal welfare and antibiotic usage are accurate and verifiable; as such, regulatory bodies, food companies, and retailers should strive to enforce high standards for food labeling to meet consumer expectations.

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Survey Methodology

From June 23 to 25, 2023, Data for Progress and Farm Forward conducted a [survey](#) of 1,149 U.S. adults using web panel respondents. The sample was weighted to be representative of likely voters by age, gender, education, race, geography. The survey was conducted in English. The margin of error is ± 3 percentage points.