



Natural Pet Food 101

Leading with Technical Expertise - White Paper

Jarrod Kersey & Leah Lambrakis, Department of Technical Services

What does Natural mean?

One of the most common questions asked by pet parents is: “what does natural mean?” On the surface, it is a fairly straight-forward answer. “Natural”, as defined by the Association of American Feed Control Officials (AAFCO), is⁽¹⁾:

“a feed or feed ingredient derived solely from plant, animal or mined sources, either in its unprocessed state or having been subject to physical processing, heat processing, rendering, purification, extraction, hydrolysis, enzymolysis or fermentation, but not having been produced by or subject to a chemically synthetic process and not containing any additives or processing aids that are chemically synthetic except in amounts as might occur in good manufacturing practices.”

However, most pet parents aren’t too familiar with the terms hydrolysis, enzymolysis, fermentation, or other ingredient processes. Pet parents may tend to associate “whole ingredients” with a more “natural” product. The reality is, “natural” is not just black or white, it is a continuum. An apple on a tree would be in its most “natural” form, but when picked, peeled, crushed, separated and preserved, it goes through a transformative process producing apple sauce, apple juice, apple slices, etc. that may or may not be deemed natural under AAFCO standards. For the distinction of natural/not natural, AAFCO has drawn the line that essentially allows for synthetic ingredients so long as they are classified as a nutrient (vitamins, minerals and/or other trace nutrients) and with the appropriate disclaimer (fortified with vitamins, minerals and other trace nutrients).

AAFCO’s allowance of vitamins, minerals and/or other trace nutrients was due to the fact that these nutrients are essential in the manufacturing of complete and balanced pet food. At the time of the adoption of this definition and associated guidance, the other key distinction AAFCO asserted was between synthetic and non-synthetically preserved products. Therefore, preservatives such as BHA, BHT, potassium sorbate, and others, were not to be associated with a “natural” claim. The definition also excludes artificial colors and flavors.



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This, however, does not technically exclude synthetic, non-nutritive compounds from being present in pet food. Within the “natural” definition, chemically synthetic compounds may be acceptable “in amounts as might occur in good manufacturing practices.” This exception was added to the definition to allow for the use of processing aids that may be synthetic. At the time, for example, hexane was cited as a prime example of a synthetic processing aid that is used in the oil extraction process, but the compound is then largely removed.

In the apple example, a whole apple is in its most natural state. Any removal of the “whole” arguably leads to the apple in its “less natural” state. Removal or separation of parts or pieces of the apple with a synthetic compound, such as a processing aid, may be considered by pet parents as “less natural” than simple physical or mechanical action. However, the distinction the AAFCO definition draws is the addition of artificial preservatives, colors or flavors.

So, what does Natural really mean?

Labeling and advertising standards exist to help ensure consumers are not misled and a level playing field is created in the market. The AAFCO definition of natural, with the associated claim guidance, provides a regulatory framework so a standard applies that States can use to regulate claim language. Additionally, pet food companies understand the criteria to produce pet food that meets these standards, but pet parents may expect more than simply no synthetic preservatives, artificial flavors or colors.

The “natural” category has evolved over the past 20 years since AAFCO promulgated these standards. The result has been “natural” pet foods with increased whole ingredient inclusion, exclusion of grains, addition of ancient grains, decreased processing, among other consumer perceived “natural” criteria. Additionally, new product formats and channels have evolved. So while the “natural” threshold of no synthetic preservatives, artificial colors or flavors is the minimum bar from a regulatory perspective, it may have little relevance for consumers' perceptions of what constitutes a “natural” product.

Our Commitment – Leading with Technical Expertise – Leah and Jarrod are here to provide guidance and insights – do not hesitate to connect with us at Simmons Pet Food, pfcomments@simfoods.com. We would love to hear from you and be part of your pet’s nutrition solution!



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Literature Referenced

1. AAFCO. Association of American Feed Control Officials. 2021. Official Publication.