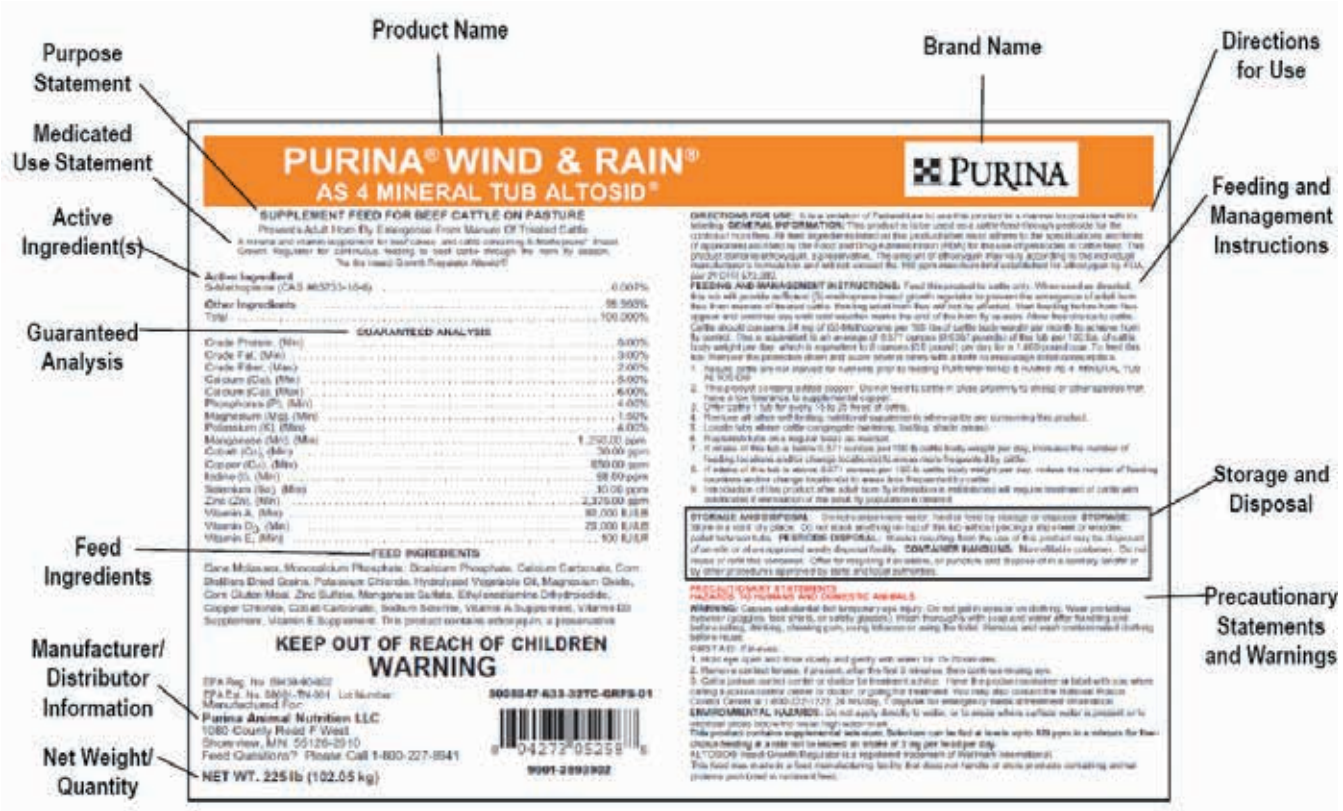
Tagology 101

What feed tags do and don't tell you.

by ***Christina Hayes***



Reading and comparing feed tags to help determine which cattle feed to purchase can be a daunting task. It may even seem like you need a Ph.D. to make sense of all the information on the tag, but a little knowledge goes a long way.

Because feed tags are required by law to be on every bag of commercial cattle feed, a feed tag is the only consistent information available across all brands that can be used to compare products. However, there are limits to what can be included on cattle feed tags. Christina Hayes, Ph.D., beef product manager at Purina Animal Nutrition breaks down what you can and cannot determine from the information on the tag.

What a feed tag can tell you

The amount of information on a feed tag can seem overwhelming, but the information is typically pretty straightforward.

The following are key components of a feed tag:

- **Product Name:** An obvious but important piece of information. If a product is medicated, the word "medicated" will follow the product name.
- **Brand Name:** The brand of the product is listed.
- **Purpose Statement:** Information about the species and animal class the feed is indicated for. It is critical to check that your feed has been specifically formulated for your class of cattle. For example, you would not want to feed a product designed for "mature cows at maintenance" to "young, growing heifers."
- **Medicated Use Statement:** If the feed is approved for use with an active ingredient, the Environmental Protection Agency or Food and Drug Administration indication for use statement will be included. If a Veterinary Feed Directive (VFD) regulated ingredient is used, a VFD statement will also be listed.
- **Active Ingredient(s):** Lists any active ingredients in the feed and their associated level.
- **Guaranteed Analysis:** Lists required nutrients, dependent upon the intended use of the feed and species/animal class. It also lists the nutrient level the government regulates. Any nutrient guaranteed on the tag is potentially subject to testing by regulatory agencies to determine whether the tag guarantees are accurate.
- **Feed Ingredients:** Lists ingredients in the product beyond what is listed in the guaranteed analysis section. Feed ingredients will tell you the source of an ingredient. For example, "calcium" is listed under the guaranteed analysis, but you can see that "calcium carbonate" is its source.
- **Manufacturer/Distributor Information:** The name appearing on the label is responsible for the feed product and regulatory compliance. Typically, a mailing address will be included. Distributors use a statement "manufactured for" or "distributed by" to differentiate themselves from manufacturers.
- **Net Weight/Quantity:** Weight and quantity of feed, as packaged.
- **Directions for Use:** Explains the safe and effective use of the feed.
- **Feeding and Management Instructions:** A detailed listing of how the product should be fed and how many animals it will feed. Manufacturers formulate cattle feeds to be fed at a specific range of feeding rates. When a product is not fed according to directions, the full nutritional benefits of the feed may not be realized, and the feed may not perform as intended. The instructions should also outline other management factors to help ensure optimal product use.
- **Storage and Disposal:** Instructions for storage, disposal and container handling.
- **Precautionary Statements and Warnings:** Describes potential hazards for humans and domestic animals.

What a feed tag does not tell you

- **Nutrients needed by cattle that are not required to be guaranteed on the tag.** Even if a nutrient is not guaranteed on the label, it doesn't mean that the nutrient is not in the feed. Many manufacturers provide a completely balanced ration that includes many more nutrients than listed in the guarantee.
- **Nutrient and ingredient quality or bioavailability.** Although a feed tag might state that a feed is 10% crude fat, it doesn't tell you anything about the fat's quality. For example, there are many ways to blend ingredients to make a feed that is 10% crude fat, but cattle will respond very differently depending on which ingredients supply that fat. In many cases, a feed containing 10% crude fat made with high-quality ingredients will provide more crude fat than a 10% crude fat feed containing lower quality ingredients. The same principle holds true for protein, fiber, vitamin and mineral sources. Ingredient quality, stability and availability may vary based on the source.
- **The feed recipe.** An ingredient list is not a recipe – it's only a list of ingredients used to make a product. Cattle have protein, vitamin, mineral and calorie requirements, and ingredients are just vehicles for delivering nutrients. Also, the inclusion of an ingredient does not mean that it is included at a physiologically meaningful level – an ingredient may be listed but only a trace amount included.
- **Feed ingredients within a collective term.** A collective term for a group of ingredients, such as "molasses products," allows ingredients within the group to be interchanged based on availability. This means the feed tag can stay the same even when ingredients within the collective term change. For example, "molasses products" can remain on the feed tag even though the manufacturer switches between beet and cane molasses based on seasonal ingredient availability.
- **Quality control.** There is an industry minimum standard for quality and safety measures for animal feed products, but many companies go above and beyond the minimum. It's up to you to investigate a manufacturer's approach to quality control.
- **Research behind the feed.** You might assume that all cattle feeds are well researched and tested before being sold on the market, but this is not always the case. It's relatively simple to develop a cattle feed formula based on published nutrient requirements and common ingredients used and bring that feed to market with no further testing. Not all feed companies conduct comprehensive scientific research to support their cattle feeds.

A feed tag does not tell you the full story. The most accurate indicator of a high-quality feed is how cattle perform. At Purina, we take the most pride in things you would not find on the feed tag. We study cattle nutrition advances, conduct scientific research at the Purina Animal Nutrition Center, complete field trials to ensure feeds perform before they are made publicly available, fine-tune feed formulations, work with quality control and production specialists and constantly monitor product quality.

Simply put, we make every effort to ensure our cattle feed products are the best they can be. HW

Editor's note: This article was provided by Purina Nutrition LLC.