

Understanding the Feed Label

A technical tip from Marion Zoological

Choosing an animal food from among the assortment of pet and exotic animal foods on the market can be an overwhelming experience. Given that billions of dollars are spent each year on animal foods, manufacturers compete for these dollars by trying to make their products stand out among the competition. The label is one way to make a product stand out.

Animal food labels are often confusing and difficult to understand. Packaging and labels carry descriptive words such as “premium”, “gourmet”, and “natural”. These terms, however, have no standard definition or regulatory meaning (FDA, 1991). Other terms do have specific meanings, and pet foods, which are regulated by the Food and Drug Administration’s Center for Veterinary Medicine (CVM), must carry certain information on their labels. It is important to note that commercial animal food must list only four pieces of information: guaranteed analysis, ingredients, feeding guidelines, and the manufacturer’s name and address.

The guaranteed analysis specifies a product’s minimum percentages of crude protein and crude fat. It also gives maximum percentages of crude fiber and moisture. Although not required, some manufactures also give percentages of other nutrients.

The ingredients list on the label is an important area to most consumers. Animal food ingredients must be listed on the label in descending order by weight, but the weight includes moisture (water) in the ingredients, which makes it complicated to interpret. Also difficult to interpret are ingredients that are similar but are listed as separate ingredients and when combined may outweigh other ingredients preceding them.

Feeding directions on animal foods provide only broad guidelines. Nutrient requirements vary according to a bird’s age, body weight, reproductive status, and other things.

Consumers should look for information on how to contact the manufacturer. Only the manufacturer’s name and address are required, but customers should be able to call or email manufacturers to ask questions and manufactures should be responsive. Manufacturers may not tell you how much of a particular food ingredient is in their product (because that’s part of their proprietary formula), but they should tell you how much of any nutrient is in the product. If the manufacturer will not provide nutrient specifications upon request, then choose another product.

Literature Cited: