

✘ “Green Kosher” is the new advertising tag for Empire Kosher food processors, based in rural Pennsylvania. But what does it mean?

There is an important backstory here. Empire is the nation’s leading kosher poultry producer, which has aggressively pursued a progressive image in the media (and particularly the Jewish media). It has done this even more aggressively in light of the shameful behavior of [Agriprocessors](#), previously the nation’s leading producer of kosher meat, which was sort of the poster child of hypocritical religion and perverted business ethics: hiding behind its image of ultra-Orthodox piety, the owners of Agriprocessors abused their animals with inhumane practices, dumped untreated animal waste effluent into local rivers, violated minimum wage laws, busted attempts at unionization, and hired illegal immigrants to use child labor. And through all of this, it was defended by large swathes of the ultra-Orthodox establishment. All okay if you talk to God everyday, I suppose. Finally, [ICE raided the plant](#), the federal government administered tens of thousands of dollars in fines, Agriprocessors filed for bankruptcy, and its owner Shlomo Rubashkin, was convicted of several counts of financial, wire, and banking fraud.

Enter [Empire Kosher](#), which has a unionized work force, relies on a network of local, family-run farms for its poultry, and uses only cage-free eggs and chickens. It says that it regularly submits to third-party animal welfare audits. It lavishly funds [Hazon](#), the organization spearheading the Jewish sustainable food movement. Its current CEO, [Greg Rosenbaum](#), collects humanitarian awards by the handful and is close with Bill Clinton.

And now Empire has aggressively begun marketing itself as “Green Kosher.” What does that mean?

Well, it’s not organic. Empire does have a line of organic products, but most of its products are not. So what exactly is it? I checked out its website to get a better description, and [this is what it says](#):

Eating healthy, safely and strictly kosher, buying responsibly, promoting worker and animal rights, protecting the environment, and supporting small family farmers and their communities.

*That’s it.* All good, but pretty vague. Even George W. Bush said he believes in “protecting the environment and supporting small family farmers and their communities.” Unless there are specific guidelines, it’s not clear whether Empire is green or simply greenwashing. The

company has a good record, and after the Agriprocessors outrages, it is important to have a company that is doing good things. But when it comes to environmental standards, one must [trust but verify](#).

Such a posture is particularly important because many progressive Jewish organizations have attempted to add to the kosher laws ecological strictures; many years ago, Rabbi [Zalman Schachter-Shalomi](#) (a somewhat ironic last name) proposed replacing traditional kashrut with "[eco-kashrut](#)." It makes sense in a lot of ways: it makes little sense to claim to uphold God's laws while destroying God's planet. If Empire really follows up with excellent environmental practices, then it could go a long way to advancing eco-kashrut. But if it doesn't, it could destroy the brand.

Empire just launched the ad campaign, and one hopes that they have prepared for public scrutiny. Either way, that scrutiny should come soon.