

The Case for Labeling GMOs

Americans want to know what is in their food

By Andrew Kimbrell

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The public has the right to know what's in our food. Over 70 percent of processed foods have genetically modified ingredients. GM crops are modified to contain novel patented bacterial and viral DNA never before seen in foods. Not surprisingly, most polls show around 90 percent of the public wants to know which foods are genetically modified. They want the same right to choose as consumers in the 64 countries around the world that mandate some form of labeling of GM foods.

Washington state is currently ground zero, with a GM labeling initiative on the Nov. 5 ballot. Chemical and food corporations have raised over \$20 million to defeat the measure. They are willing to spend whatever it takes. Last year, the opposition spent over \$45 million to narrowly defeat a similar initiative in California.

Why are agrichemical companies willing to spend such huge sums to defeat labeling? To us, it seems simple. These companies' GM foods would not be able to compete in an informed marketplace against non-GM foods.

The fact is that, after spending 30 years genetically modifying crops, these companies have failed to come up with a single trait that would attract consumers. GM foods do not have improved nutrition, fewer calories, better taste or lower costs. In other words, they have no market advantage at all. A rational consumer, when faced with a non-genetically engineered bag of corn chips versus a labeled genetically engineered bag would have no incentive to buy the engineered brand. Labeling would expose these companies' complete failure to provide a single benefit to America's consumers. The only thing these foods offer is potential risk.

There is also no altruistic reason to buy GM foods. GM crops do not increase yield or nutrition, therefore they do nothing to help the hungry. They also increase overall pesticide use by millions of pounds a year.

The companies opposing labeling have another self-serving reason to fight it besides their fear of the market. With labeling, health care professionals would know if an allergic or other adverse reaction was the result of a specific genetically modified food. If a mother comes to a pediatrician with an infant that has had an allergic or toxic reaction from drinking GM formula, then she will also be able to bring the label indicating the formula was modified. Health care professionals could then trace the protein that might be at fault, and the mother could potentially hold the producer liable. This is not something corporations want to see.

Opponents also claim that labeling would be too expensive for producers and consumers. However, food companies change their labels all the time. One simple line, "Produced with Genetic Engineering," on the package would be of negligible cost to producers and wouldn't cost consumers a dime.

Finally, labeling opponents say that they shouldn't have to label because no one has definitively proven that GM foods are unsafe. But we don't label unsafe products. We take them off the shelves. If GM foods are proven unsafe, then we won't label them. We'll stop selling them.

Win or lose in Washington state this November, the writing is on the wall. The American people want to know what is in their food and whether it happens in Washington state or in Washington, D.C., GM food labeling is only a matter of time.

Andrew Kimbrell is executive director at the Center for Food Safety.