

## Mandatory GMO Labeling Law Concerns By Kristen Shifflett

### **SUMMARY**

GMOs are foods produced from organisms that have been genetically modified with DNA from other plants, bacteria, or a virus. Genetically modified foods can be grown faster, made to have a longer-shelf life and taste, and developed to be more resistant to bugs, disease, or drought. Currently, the only approved GM foods grown in the U.S. are alfalfa, canola, corn, cotton, papaya, soy, sugar beets, zucchini, and yellow summer squash (Johnson and O'Connor). The GMO debate has been a steady but slow-brewing issue for the past two decades that has recently started to gain more attention and traction. Only 64 countries currently require GMO labeling; those include 28 nations in the EU, Japan, Australia, Brazil, Russia, and China (Just Label It). However, the U.S. does not require nationally mandated GMO food labeling laws though many U.S. states are seeking to change that and some like Vermont already have. Last year, Sen. Pat Roberts (R-Kan.) introduced the controversial bill H.R. 1599, later dubbed the "Safe and Accurate Food Labeling Act of 2015", which would stop states from requiring mandatory GMO food labeling laws. While the bill passed in the House, it failed to pass in the Senate two weeks ago.

### **CONTROVERSY IN-DEPTH**

The Safe and Accurate Food Labeling Act of 2015 and other food labeling laws are at the heart of the GMO controversy. People are divided on GMOs due to health and safety concerns, possible food industry businesses expenses and profit losses, and the possible increase in the price of food. It comes down to two opinions – GMO's are safe and there is no need to further add GMO labeling or GMO's are not safe and American's have a 'right to know' or a 'right to choose' what they are eating (Hemphill and Banerjee).

There is overwhelming support from the scientific community that GMOs are not harmful, however many researchers believe that a blanket consensus claiming GMOs are safe is false and should be evaluated on a case-by-case basis (Hilbeck et al 1-2). Scientist Sheldon Krimsky discovered some possible health and safety issues during an experiment that showed it is possible to transfer allergenic proteins from one plant to another. Much of scientific research is conducted on animals to ascertain side effects. Krimsky patently believes that GMO experiments with animals do not always provide the best assessment of human immune system resistance because our bodies respond differently (889-890). Research shows that a multitude of short-term feeding studies have proven no adverse effects result from eating GM foods but there are conflicting results from long-term and multigenerational studies. This highlights the divide in public and professional opinions about health and safety concerns of GMO foods.

More than 90 percent of Americans think mandatory GMO labels are a good idea (McWilliams). Consequently, it is the 'right to know' and 'right to choose' foods that concerns the food industry. Another report by the Consumers Union found it would cost an additional \$2.30 per consumer each year (Entine). However, labeling costs are a small fraction of what most companies are concerned about. Companies worry GMO food labels will influence customers' perceptions of GMO's and cause them to perceive of GMO's as unsafe, thus causing the customer to not purchase their item and resulting in profit losses (Hemphill and Banerjee). Another part of the problem with mandatory labeling is the costly separation of GMO and non-GMO foods. In the U.S., 85% of corn, 95% of sugar beets and canola, 91% of soy and up to 75% of processed foods on the market are genetically modified or contain GM ingredients (McWilliams; Johnson and O'Connor). It would be a massive and expensive undertaking of "\$150 million to \$920 million" in annual costs to separate and audit GMO and non-GMO foods (McWilliams).

**CONCLUSIONS**

Despite the Safe and Accurate Food Labeling Act of 2015 failure to pass, there are other legislature in the works seeking to mandate or block mandates for mandatory GMO food labeling laws. Further research fully determining long-term health benefits or risks needs to be undertaken to put this debate to rest.

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