

PRO/CON: Putting GMO labels on food

By Ronnie Cummins and Richard Williams, Tribune News Service on 11.13.15

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Demonstrators rally in favor of labeling GMO food at the Capitol in Albany, New York, April 28, 2015. Photo: AP Photo/Tim Roske

PRO: Most Americans believe GMO foods are unsafe; they need labels to avoid them

Health and food safety are hot button issues for millions of Americans — and rightly so.

Polls indicate alarm over the contamination of everyday foods by pesticides, antibiotics, hormones, synthetic additives and, especially, genetically modified organisms (GMOs).

A recent New York Times poll found that 93 percent of Americans want GMOs labeled, an action already required by 64 nations.

Two-thirds of Americans believe that GMOs are unsafe. Millions of consumers are switching over to non-GMO, organic foods, and as a result organics have moved from a niche market into a \$40 billion powerhouse.

Indeed, Americans now spend more than 10 cents of every food dollar for items that are labeled “organic,” “non-GMO” or “natural.”

A series of highly publicized GMO labeling ballot initiatives in California, Washington and Oregon have fueled the fires of the “Frankenfoods” controversy — with the big food and chemical companies spending vast sums to stop labeling.

Vermont, Maine and Connecticut have passed popular laws requiring labeling of GMOs. Eight counties in California, Washington, Oregon and Hawaii have banned GMO crops altogether.

Vermont's mandatory GMO labeling law goes into effect in July 2016, causing near-panic among major food brands, who face the dilemma of either removing all GMO ingredients from their products — which is what happened in the European Union after GMO food labeling became mandatory in 1998 — or else affixing what Monsanto has called a “skull and crossbones” GMO label on the front of their packages and bottles.

Eighty percent of supermarket foods now contain GMOs and the toxic chemicals sprayed on GMOs.

In March 2015, the International Agency for Research on Cancer of the World Health Organization (WHO) declared Monsanto's Roundup glyphosate herbicide a “probable carcinogen.”

That prompted the banning of all GMO cultivation in several dozen nations, including Germany, France, Italy, the Netherlands, Austria, Poland, Greece, Hungary, the United Kingdom, Russia and Denmark.

In the U.S., the glyphosate herbicide currently is sprayed heavily on 84 percent of all GMO crops, including corn, soybeans, canola, sugar beets, cotton, alfalfa, wheat, beans and rice.

In California, authorities announced that Monsanto's glyphosate would be added to its list of cancer-causing chemicals requiring special monitoring and warning signs.

The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) previously acknowledged that long-term exposure to glyphosate can cause kidney and reproductive damage. And a report by a senior researcher at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology last year connected glyphosate to damage to the human gut and digestive system, as well as hormone disruption, impaired liver detoxification and lowered nutrient absorption.

Meanwhile, with the rise of GMO-induced superweeds on the majority of U.S. farmland, the EPA, U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and Food and Drug Administration (FDA) have given the green light to a controversial new generation of GMO crops that can be sprayed with dicamba and other strong toxicides including 2,4-D — a component of Agent Orange.

Billions of pounds of glyphosate, atrazine, 2,4-D and other toxic pesticides are now being sprayed on our food, accompanied by billions of pounds of highly polluting chemical fertilizers.

This GMO chemical onslaught is destroying our health and contaminating our soil, surface water and air. Meanwhile, the emissions from industrial farming have become major factors in global warming.

Americans want GMO labeling. Unfortunately Monsanto, other big food companies and their minions in the U.S. Congress have decided that you, the consumer, have no right to know what's in your food.

In July, the U.S. House of Representatives passed a highly unpopular bill taking away states' and consumers' rights to require labels on GMO foods.

The bill also makes it legal to fraudulently label GMO and chemical tainted foods as "natural." Now this bill, dubbed the DARK (Deny Americans the Right to Know) Act, goes to the Senate.

Americans can help stop passage of the DARK Act by picking up their cellphones and texting LabelGMO to 97779. Tell Congress you want mandatory labels on GMOs.

ABOUT THE WRITER: A leading global food activist, Ronnie Cummins is executive director of Organic Consumers Association, a nonprofit U.S.-based network of 850,000 consumers, and the author of "Genetically Engineered Foods: A Self-Defense Guide for Consumers." Readers may write him at OCA, 6771 South Silver Hill Drive, Finland, MN 55603

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CON: GMO labels won't make foods safer, only more expensive

It's been estimated that 70 to 80 percent of foods eaten in the United States contain ingredients that have been genetically modified.

But labeling these foods is certainly not a food safety issue; there has never been a case of harm to people from GMO products — ever. And it's also not something that the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) can legally do right now, because there is no scientific difference between GM foods and conventional foods.

By the year 2025, the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) estimates that two-thirds of the world's population will confront a water shortage and ecosystems will also suffer.

One way to help mitigate this scenario is to promote the use of GMO foods, which reduces the need for plowing. This allows the soil to trap moisture and helps plants retain water.

In some cases, this will make the difference between a harvest or crop failure. Some results show crop yields increasing by 4 to 8 percent in arid conditions with others suggesting gains as much as 21 percent.

With nearly 1 person in every 9 not having enough to eat on this planet, that's a promising start.

Another way that GMO foods help us is that they use less pesticide. One study found that it reduced the quantity of pesticides by 37 percent and the cost by 39 percent. Although pesticides get a bad rap, the truth is that the trace amounts of pesticides that you find in the average diet are totally safe.

As one toxicologist put it, there are more carcinogens in a single cup of coffee than there are in all of the pesticide residue you consume in a year. And that doesn't mean that coffee will give you cancer, it means human exposure to pesticides is extremely low.

An increase in yield and a decrease in pesticide costs will lower the price of foods, and that's a good thing, particularly if you're not well off.

It's amazing that, after 20 years of GMO crops, there is still controversy. In fact, manipulation of food genes is just an extension of natural plant breeding that began between 8,000 and 10,000 years ago when farmers chose the best plants to retain for planting in the following year.

Modern-day corn, for example, is the result of genetically modified plantings from thousands of years ago. Within the last few hundred years, farmers began artificially mating or cross-pollinating plants to increase yields. GMO foods are a scientific extension of this process, and modern technology allows the process to be done to greater effect and with more specificity.

That means we can produce crops with better keeping and processing qualities, reduce spoilage due to mold, reduce allergens in food and, ultimately, grow drugs in foods.

We have already seen that with Golden Rice, a GMO food that contains beta carotene (Vitamin A) which helps to reduce blindness and prevent up to 2 million deaths annually in third world countries.

The creators received a Patent for Humanity Award this year and received a blessing from Pope Francis in 2013.

Labeling GMO products would be expensive and potentially counterproductive by discouraging innovation in this necessary technology.

While labels may seem like a non-invasive way to share information, the costs on manufacturers will lead to higher food prices, and many people simply cannot afford that.

For those who wish to buy non-GMO foods, there is the option to buy organic. However, it's important to keep in mind if you buy organic, you are actually putting yourself more at risk.

Organic foods are four to eight times more likely to be recalled for microbial contamination. And for that, you are paying a lot more.

ABOUT THE WRITER: Richard Williams is vice president for policy research and director of the Regulatory Studies Program at George Mason University's Mercatus Center. A former director for social sciences at the Center for Food Safety and Applied Nutrition in the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA), he holds a PhD in economics from Virginia Tech University. Readers may write him at Mercatus Center at GMU, 3434 Washington Blvd, 4th Floor, Arlington, VA 22201

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Quiz

- 1 Which of the following sentences from the PRO article BEST summarizes the author's point of view?
- (A) A series of highly publicized GMO labeling ballot initiatives in California, Washington and Oregon have fueled the fires of the "Frankenfoods" controversy — with the big food and chemical companies spending vast sums to stop labeling.
 - (B) Two-thirds of Americans believe that GMOs are unsafe. Millions of consumers are switching over to non-GMO, organic foods, and as a result organics have moved from a niche market into a \$40 billion powerhouse.
 - (C) Americans want GMO labeling. Unfortunately Monsanto, other big food companies and their minions in the U.S. Congress have decided that you, the consumer, have no right to know what's in your food.
 - (D) This GMO chemical onslaught is destroying our health and contaminating our soil, surface water and air. Meanwhile, the emissions from industrial farming have become major factors in global warming.
- 2 Which of the following represents a major point of contrast in perspective between the PRO and CON authors?
- (A) pesticides
 - (B) technology
 - (C) poverty
 - (D) food production
- 3 Which of the following organizations does the PRO author MOST strongly oppose?
- (A) New York Times
 - (B) World Health Organization
 - (C) Environmental Protection Agency
 - (D) Monsanto
- 4 Which of the following statements represents a claim made by the CON article's author?
- (A) Using GMOs reduces pesticide use and decreases the cost of food.
 - (B) Labeling GMO foods will deter people from purchasing those foods.
 - (C) The expense of using GMOs is worth the many benefits afforded by their use.
 - (D) The main benefit of GMOs is being able to produce foods containing medicines.