



Written by [Raven Clabough](#) on July 21, 2015

House Committee Passes Bill to Ban State GMO-labeling Laws

The U.S. House Agriculture Committee has approved a bill that could ban all mandatory GMO labeling in the United States. H.R. 1599, the [Safe and Accurate Food Labeling Act of 2015](#) would not require food companies to disclose their use of genetically modified ingredients. Under the bill, companies that want to indicate that a product is “GMO-free” may still do so.



The *Star Tribune* reports, “The bill represents a major victory for the food and chemical industries, which fought and failed in court to stop mandatory GMO labeling.”

The bill has found predictable support among trade associations and big food companies such as Land O’Lakes, Cargill, Hormel, and General Mills. “A state-by-state patchwork of [GMO] labeling requirements would be confusing to consumers, create supply disruptions, and increase food prices,” Cargill officials argued. “Cargill also supports the creation of a voluntary USDA-administrated certification and labeling program for non-GMO food products.”

The use of genetically modified organisms has been the subject of fierce controversy, compelling 64 countries across the world to adopt GMO-labeling rules, while 26 others have issued full or partial bans on GMO use, including France, India, and Mexico.

To create GMOs, the DNA from one or more species is added to the DNA of a particular crop in order for it to gain certain desirable traits, such as the ability to tolerate pesticides. Monsanto is the largest producer of genetically modified seeds in the world and is the leading producer of the herbicide glyphosate, marketed under the Roundup brand.

The Argentinian Federation of Health Professionals labeled glyphosate a carcinogen, explaining, “Glyphosate not only causes cancer. It is also associated with increased spontaneous abortions, birth defects, skin diseases, and respiratory and neurological disease.”

Likewise, the World Health Organization has called glyphosate a “probable human carcinogen.”

Despite these health concerns, however, GMO usage continues to expand. According to the Grocery Manufacturers Association, which opposes GMO labeling, as much as 80 percent of foods in grocery stores contain GMO ingredients.

GMO-labeling laws have already passed in Maine, Connecticut, and Vermont, while campaigns for similar laws are underway in a number of other states. But opponents of the labeling contend that GMOs are safe and do not require precautionary warnings. “A GMO labeling mandate will stigmatize GMO products, driving down demand for GMO crops,” declared Land O’Lakes CEO Chris Policinski during March testimony before the agriculture committee.

“Stigmatizing safe, proven biotechnology through patchwork state labeling mandates or even



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mandatory federal labeling jeopardizes innovation and threatens future development and use of technology in agriculture,” Policinski added. “That’s dangerous for everyone.”

Land O’Lakes contends that H.R. 1599 is critical because “all types of agriculture are needed to meet the soaring demand for food, including proven, safe biotechnologies such as GM crops.”

But Representative Rick Nolan (D-Minn.) a member of the House Agriculture Committee who opposed the bill, notes that the debate is not about whether GMOs are healthy or unsafe, but about the simple right to know what is in the food consumers purchase for themselves and their families.

Similarly, Scott Faber of the Environmental Working Group (EWG), which opposes H.R. 1599, contends that lawmakers should be standing up for Americans’ right to know. “Americans have the right to know what’s in food and how it was grown — the same as citizens of 64 other nations that require GMO labeling,” said Faber, EWG’s vice president of government affairs. “It’s time for lawmakers to recognize that right and stand for GMO labeling.”

Some lawmakers are also vocal in their advocacy for GMO labeling laws. Representative James McGovern (D-Mass.) — noting the recent research that showed pesticides commonly used in growing GMO crops may contain cancer-causing agents — points out that though 64 other countries have mandatory GMO labeling laws “the sky hasn’t fallen in.”

But GMO supporters on the House Agriculture Committee claim that H.R.1599 is a sufficient compromise between both supporters and opponents of GMO labeling. “Consumers increasingly want to know more about where their food comes from and how it is produced,” said Representative Collin Peterson (D-Minn.), ranking member of the House Agriculture Committee. “I think H.R. 1599 satisfies that demand while also recognizing what we know about the safety of the foods that our farmers produce. The bill is a workable solution that will alleviate the potential mess of 50 states with 50 different labeling schemes,” he said.

Yet the bill does more than that. If enacted, the new law would allow some GMO products to be called “natural.”

Consumer and environmental groups such as Just Label It and the Center for Food Safety, as well as members of Congress from Vermont and Maine, opine that the bill is merely an effort to keep people from knowing what they are eating. They claim H.R. 1599 is an attempt to control information in such a way that it serves big businesses rather than the American people. “There is an enormous self-interest on the part of the chemical and food industries,” declared Representative Peter Welch (D-Vt.), noting that it’s “bizarre” for industry groups to call GMOs safe, and yet fight so hard to conceal their presence.

And claims that GMOs are safe have been contested by reputable organizations, which point out that GMOs have not been properly studied by the Food and Drug Administration.

According to the Institute for Responsible Technology (IRT), new types of food substances must typically undergo extensive testing, including long-term animal feeding studies, when they are introduced, unless they are deemed “generally recognized as safe” (GRAS). In order to be deemed as such, the substance must undergo substantial peer-reviewed published studies and there must be an overwhelming consensus among the scientific community.

However, in 1992 IRT reported that the FDA declared that genetically modified crops are GRAS as long as the producers say they are, adding, “A company can even introduce a GM food to the market without telling the agency.”



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Decades ago, the editor of the medical journal *The Lancet* observed, "It is astounding that the US Food and Drug Administration has not changed their stance on genetically modified food adopted in 1992.... This stance is taken despite good reasons to believe that specific risks may exist.... Governments should never have allowed these products into the food chain without insisting on rigorous testing for effects on health."

Writing about allergies and transgenic foods in *The New England Journal of Medicine*, Dr. Marion Nestle stated that FDA's lax regulations "appear to favor industry over consumer protection."

And while biotech companies do participate in a voluntary consultation process with the FDA, in the absence of FDA studies or commissions, companies can submit whatever information they choose. Former EPA scientist Doug Gurian-Sherman, who analyzed FDA review records obtained through the Freedom of Information Act, observed, "It is clear that FDA's current voluntary notification process (even if made mandatory) is not up to the task of ensuring the safety of future GE [genetically engineered] crops."

According to the Institute for Responsible Technology, the very agency tasked with protecting the health of the food supply has also been tasked with promoting biotech products, representing a "clear conflict."

Suzanne Wuerthele, a U.S. EPA toxicologist, stated, "This technology is being promoted, in the face of concerns by respectable scientists and in the face of data to the contrary, by the very agencies which are supposed to be protecting human health and the environment. The bottom line in my view is that we are confronted with the most powerful technology the world has ever known, and it is being rapidly deployed with almost no thought whatsoever to its consequences."

It appears that these biotech companies still enjoy the full support of the federal government. H.R. 1599 will move on to a full vote on the House floor, where it is expected to pass.



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