

GENETICALLY MODIFIED FOODS: FACT SHEET

THE ISSUE: IN 30 SECONDS

Genetically modified foods (GM foods) are crops that have been genetically engineered to produce a certain trait, such as resistance to cold or pesticides, which would not be possible naturally. In recent years, there has been a strong push for the labeling of foods that contain genetically modified products, especially because 88% of corn and 94% of soy grown in the U.S. are genetically modified, but do not have to be labeled as such.¹

THE ISSUE: AN OVERVIEW

“Genetic engineering is the process of breaking the natural boundaries that exist between species to produce new life forms that will produce a variety of desired traits. For example, genes from salmon can be spliced into tomatoes to make them more resistant to cold weather, thereby yielding a larger crop when the weather is less than favorable.”² But how unnatural is this process, and what are the impacts of genetically modified foods on the human body, the environment, and our economy?

While the answers to these questions are currently unknown, environmentalists, scientists, farmers, and corporations have been working to find evidence to support their concerns or defend their products. Without clear evidence on either side, many consumers are demanding that genetically modified foods be labeled in order to allow them to make their own decisions about whether or not they wish to consume and support those products.

Over 60 countries have already passed legislation banning GM foods or requiring them to be labeled, and recent legislation introduced in states throughout the U.S., including New York, similarly seeks to make labeling mandatory for all products containing genetically modified organisms (GMOs).

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

What are the debates about labeling foods as being genetically modified?

Pro-Labeling³

- The government agencies that regulate GMO foods have strong ties to the biotechnology industry, and their approvals of GM foods are biased by that conflict of interest.
- Genetic engineering is unpredictable, and there are many possible unintended consequences that would be unsafe.
- There are documented risks to human health and the environment, including toxicity in rats caused by GM foods and cross-contamination between GM and organic crops.
- Bottom Line: Consumers deserve to know what is in the food they are consuming and make their own choices about whether or not they want to purchase food and food products that contain GMOs.

Anti-Labeling⁴

- Resources are already scarce and would be wasted on an unnecessary process, harming businesses.
- GM foods are already regulated by the USDA, FDA, and EPA for health and environmental safety.
- Foods have been modified based on their genetic characteristics in natural ways for centuries, with no notable negative impact on human health.

¹ About.com, <http://animalrights.about.com/od/animalsusedforfood/a/Arguments-For-And-Against-Genetically-Modified-Organisms.htm>

² PBS, http://www.pbs.org/pov/hybrid/getinvolved_article.php

³ GMO Free NY, <http://gmofreeny.net/thecaseforgmolabeling.html>

⁴ New York State Biotechnology Association, http://www.nyba.org/WYSIWYGIimage/file/Revised_Memo_in_Opposition1.pdf

- Bottom Line: Labeling GM foods sends the incorrect message that genetic modification of food, and possibly biotechnology as a whole, is inherently unsafe. Consumers can purchase organically grown foods if they are concerned about GMOs.

THE NEED

In New York State, an Assembly Bill (A3525) and a Senate Bill (S3835) are currently under consideration. These bills would require the labeling of food and food products that contain or are produced with genetically modified materials, and will be voted on in 2014, making this a critical time for those on both sides of the debate to make their voices heard on the labeling of GMOs.

LOCAL ORGANIZATIONS

Anti-GMO:

GMO Free NY
<http://www.gmofreeny.net>

Pro-Biotechnology:

New York Biotechnology Association
<http://www.nyba.org/>

CONNECTIONS TO JUSTICE

Right to Know:

Opponents of GM foods call for legislation that would require food companies to label genetically modified foods in order to make sure consumers are informed of what is in the food they are purchasing. *Proponents* of GM foods argue that labeling could appear to be a warning label that the foods are unsafe, even if they aren't.