

# GM mislabeling on the California ballot

*By ACSH Staff — June 18, 2012*

What purpose would a label for food containing genetically modified ingredients serve? The question has come to a head in California, where a measure that would require such labeling will appear on the state's November ballot.

Those in favor of the proposal insist that its purpose is clear: it would allow consumers to make an informed choice about products containing GM ingredients. Anyone wishing to avoid such ingredients, whether on political, environmental, or health-related grounds, would have an easier time of it. And the Organic Consumers Association maintains that labeling GMO ingredients in the U.S. would put domestic markets on a level playing field with European Union markets, where there are in fact guidelines for labeling GM foods.

However, agricultural, industry and scientific groups counter that GM labeling is wholly unnecessary, from either an environmental or a health perspective. Not only have extensive assessments found GM crops to be safe, they point out, but such labeling would be costly to both farmers and food manufacturers, and would mostly likely stir up unjustified fear and confusion among the general public. Trivial but costly lawsuits, spurred by the novel target of mislabeled GM products, are another unpleasant prospect. In fact, ACSH's Dr. Gilbert Ross asserts, the main reason these groups hope to get GM labeling enacted is precisely to encourage fear and avoidance of these safe products. These ideological and market-seeking opponents know well that GM crops have been safely planted, harvested, and consumed in abundance since 1996 and have been found responsible for zero adverse effects over that time.

As ACSH advisor Greg Conko, a senior fellow at the Competitive Enterprise Institute whose research focuses on food safety issues, observes, "Labeling is a wholly disproportionate solution to a problem that doesn't even exist, given that there are thousands of voluntarily labeled 'non-genetically engineered' foods on the market enabling consumers who wish to avoid bioengineered products. The only conceivable purpose for singling out biotechnology for special labeling is to scare consumers away from a superior technology.

And the California ballot has implications beyond state lines. The FDA is currently considering a petition to label GM foods nationwide; the outcome of this trend-setting state's November vote will no doubt influence that decision. Thus, ACSH's Dr. Elizabeth Whelan says, "We hope that voters in California will make their decision based on the actual scientific evidence, as opposed to casting a ballot based only on unfounded fears."

The question raised by California is an issue that merits everyone's attention, so we leave you with some remarks from another ACSH colleague an M.D. and an American Medical Association member, as well as an expert in biotech agriculture, who wishes to remain anonymous. This colleague advises us that "the vast majority of soybeans and maize in the US are bioengineered,

and approximately 70 percent of processed foods found on grocery store shelves contain ingredients and oils derived from biotech crops. Extensive data and experience support the contention that bioengineered food and feed is as safe and nutritious as food derived via conventional technologies." He writes, In the absence of material differences in safety and nutritional value, there is no indication of a scientific or medical need to label bioengineered foods."

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