

USDA seeks to resolve GMO labeling stalemate

By ACSH Staff — May 15, 2015



According to numerous news reports, Secretary of Agriculture Tom

Vilsack [announced](#) ^[1] in a letter to USDA employees that the department is developing a new type of certification protocol that companies could use to label their products non-GMO. As anyone even slightly aware of US food issues knows, the dispute over GMO labeling is one of the thorniest issues in the marketplace today. (Note: there is nothing of this nature posted on the official USDA website, which is why we are citing news reports instead of anything official).

Scientists have for years assured consumers that genetically engineered foods are safe and nutritious, and we have presented this view in our recent publication, [Food and You](#) ^[2]. However, professional fearmongering groups such as the Environmental Working Group, [which is backed by many organic food companies](#) ^[3], have won over many to the stance that these foods are somehow less safe or nutritious none of which is true.

These anti-scientific tactics have been successful, to the point where Vermont, Maine and Connecticut are mandating GMO labeling. (These efforts have failed, however, in other states.) Different state regulations would make the marketing and sale of these foods much more difficult and expensive. As might be expected, the food industry is fighting against such mandated labeling.

Perhaps in order to quiet the dispute, and at the request of a leading global company according to Secretary Vilsack, the USDA is developing a voluntary certification program, much as it did for organic foods. This program would set up a verification process that companies would pay for (and of course would also increase consumer prices). A bill proposed by Kansas Representative Mike Pompeo would also provide for voluntary non-GMO labeling, and would preempt any state laws.

On the one hand, such a voluntary program might be useful in quelling the phony right-to-know what's in our food argument. However, it still can be construed as suggesting that somehow GMO-containing foods are less healthful than others. This voluntary absence labeling program might decrease the ability of some manufacturers to cheat in that they would have to actually know what's in their products, said ACSH advisor Greg Conko. He also agreed that it might decrease pressure for a mandatory labeling process, although the program announced by Secretary Vilsack

doesn't seem to directly address that issue.

Finally, the USDA's portfolio includes only meat and dairy products. The FDA covers all other foods. Would that agency also subscribe to the USDA's program, queried ACSH advisor Dr. Alan McHughen. He continued

...does not contain labels *can* be meaningful for certain consumers, but only if they are, in FDA parlance, truthful and not misleading. For example, a company that goes out of its way to produce a food completely devoid of peanuts, and is willing to shoulder the liability, might market to those with peanut allergies with the does not contain peanuts label. *That* could be a meaningful label. But the current Does not contain GMOs as it is currently used-- is both untruthful and misleading, or else truthful (in having no GMOs inside) but useless (and thereby misleading), such as when it is applied to pasta or other foods for which there are no relevant GM versions available anyway."

ACSH's Dr. Ruth Kava elaborates, For those consumers who have been sufficiently frightened about GMO ingredients, they can already rest assured of the non-GMO origins of their foods (not that it matters) if they buy organic foods, so it seems that this program would be duplicative to some extent. The real devil is in the details would the USDA program override state mandated labeling? Would consumers understand that non-GMO labels are not the same as organic labels? How much more expensive would such non-GMO labeled foods be? Finally, and most important, how would such a government program fit with the scientific facts that genetically engineered foods are not less safe or nutritious than any others?

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[2] <http://acsh.org/2014/03/food-guide-modern-agricultural-biotechnology/>

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