

Why the Cheerio GMO story won't go away soon

The fall out continues from the decision by General Mills to dump genetically modified sugar and starch in the making of its iconic original Cheerios brand. The formulaic changes are minimal. Oats, the main ingredient, aren't a GM crop. The original version before the change, and all other Cheerio versions going forward, do contain ingredients made from genetically modified corn, in the cornstarch, and sugar. There's only one gram of sugar per serving of Cheerios (which is why it's popular as a low sugar food for children).

The move caught Nathanael Johnson at *Grist* by surprise. "Back in October, I listened in on a press conference in which activists announced that they were going to hammer on General Mills until the company agreed to label Cheerios as non-GMO. I have to admit, I thought nothing would come of it. The participants were asserting way too many dodgy claims for real journalists to take them seriously ([you can listen here](#)). I hung up part way through and I didn't see any coverage come from the event. But apparently someone more important than me was paying attention: General Mills"

So why did GM make the switch? It's not clear whether protests launched by fringe but loud activist groups like Green America had impacted sales or profits. But considering the current hostile climate regarding GMOs, at least in the media and on the web, the move could be seen as preemptive, dictated in part by fiduciary responsibility: why put General Mills stakeholders, including stockholders, at risk when the cost of making the change, at least for this one product, is minimal. If foods with genetically modified ingredients develop a stigma in the marketplace as anti-GMO activists hope, companies face the prospect of losing market share—and yet might possibly gain market share by making the switch.

"While General Mills is appealing to some Americans' growing anxiety about ingesting genetically modified ingredients in their foods, it's a move that has more to do with marketing than with well-being, experts said, similar to the gluten-free trend," [writes](#) Martha C. White, an NBC News contributor, adding that it's a growing niche category that could deliver market share, much as the gluten craze has fattened bottom lines of food companies and grocery stores.

An NPD survey last August found that 55 percent of consumers are concerned about GMOs in foods causing a health hazard, up more than 10 percentage points since the company began tracking it in 2002. "This really is no surprise that a major marketer would announce something about [going] GMO-free just because the percent of the population that expresses concern at some level is very high," Balzer said.

As General Mills notes, while the process of replacing a few ingredients—a gram of sugar per serving and some corn starch—is doable, large scale changes across a global product line are a different story. "For our other cereals," Cheerios writes on its website, "the widespread use of GM seed in crops such as corn, soy, or beet sugar would make reliably moving to non-GM ingredients difficult, if not impossible."

There are some risks to the move, as Lydia Depillis [points out](#) at the *Washington Post's* Wonkblog. "Even labeling some of its foods as GM-free might create the misperception that the rest of its foods are

somehow unsafe, pushing consumers toward a product that's harder to make, or other brands that specialize in all-natural recipes." she notes. "That's the argument that giant food companies have made against labeling requirements"

Science and safety concerns played no part in the decision. The tiny alterations in the organisms that make up genetically modified starch or sugar result in changes to the plant's proteins. But neither the plant's DNA nor the proteins it produces make it into corn starch or cane sugar, Cornell food scientist Margaret Smith said in a statement sent to [Yahoo! Business Insider](#):

Corn starch and sugar are highly refined products, so they contain no DNA (which is what is introduced into a genetically engineered organism) and no protein (which is what the new DNA would produce in a genetically engineered organism). Because of that, corn starch and sugar from a genetically engineered corn variety are nutritionally and chemically identical to corn starch or sugar from a non-genetically engineered variety.

This means that the new version of Cheerios that is being made without use of genetically engineered varieties will be nutritionally and chemically identical to the previous version. So it will not offer anything new to consumers – other than to give them the option to buy a product that does not support planting more acres to genetically engineered crop varieties.

For its part, General Mills posts a comprehensive summary of the basic science of genetic modification, which makes it clear the process and products of biotechnology are well tested and safe. "[W]e find broad global consensus among food and safety regulatory bodies that approved GM ingredients are safe." It lists more than 10 independent science agencies that have reviewed the health risks and certified GM crops as safe, an explanation of key sustainability benefits and the role GM can play in addressing global food shortages.

We agree with the World Health Organization (WHO) that *"the development of GM organisms (GMOs) offers the potential for increased agricultural productivity or improved nutritional value that can contribute directly to enhancing human health and development."*

According to the company, "Ensuring safe and effective food production, while conserving precious natural resources, is a longstanding commitment for General Mills. We believe biotechnology can help."