

## As FDA rejects mandatory GMO labeling, some 'green' groups advocate vandalism

U.S. Food and Drug Administration commissioner Margaret Hamburg's announcement that the FDA will not support mandatory labeling of GMOs is not sitting well with anti-GMO activists.

"The way that over many, many years FDA had interpreted the law – and its been supported by the courts – is that mandatory labeling really is appropriate and required when there is a false claim or misbranding," [Hamburg said](#). "The fact that the food contains [genetically engineered] materials does not constitute a material change in the product."

Hamburg's statement generated a stream of vitriol from advocacy groups, but not scientists. The FDA's position on GMO labeling is supported by the American Medical Association and the American Association for the Advancement of Science, among many groups, and Scientific American has [come out against](#) mandatory labeling, calling it "a bad idea."

Advocacy groups focused on the FDA statement that the foods that have been genetically engineered or contain a GMO ingredient are nutritionally and functionally identical to other foods—which is considered scientifically accurate. "So changing the genetic makeup of something (food or not) doesn't change it? Um, does anyone else see something wrong here?," sneered One Green Planet in its blog, [WTF! FDA Commissioner re-affirms that GMOs do not create a 'material change' in food](#):

This decision by the FDA is baffling, until we remind ourselves that it's often the "experts" making the decisions that have a vested interest in the foods that are deemed "safe" or unnecessary for further regulation. It's gross to think that corporate dollars may have more to do with the FDA's decisions on GMO foods than what consumers want and need, but it has and can happen.

The decision by the FDA to follow a long-established regulatory precedent prompted activist calls to take the law into their own hands—the kind of violent anti-GMO vandalism that Greenpeace engaged in with Golden Rice in the Philippines. Writes Christina Sarich for Natural Society in [Voluntary instead of mandated GMO food labeling: The industry's latest ploy](#):

If the FDA is given the option to create a voluntary label which would take precedence over all state's laws, then we might as well take to the farms and start pulling up these plants. If

someone was pointing a gun to our heads, we'd have the legal right to defend ourselves. GMO is killing us all – what's the difference? Trust the FDA – really?

The [AAAS noted in its statement](#) against mandatory labeling of GMOs that “a recent review of a dozen well-designed long-term animal feeding studies comparing GM and non-GM potatoes, soy, rice, corn and triticale found that the GM and their non-GM counterparts are nutritionally equivalent.” The [European Union concluded](#) that biotechnology and GMOs are “not per se more risky than e.g. conventional plant breeding technologies” after more than 130 research projects spanning over 25 years of research that involved more than 500 independent groups. Hamburg and the FDA has plenty of legitimate scientific evidence backing their support for voluntary labeling of GMOs.



A protester in San Francisco advocates for the labeling of GMOs. Photo courtesy of Daniel Goehring on Wikimedia.org

Many activists clamoring for GMO labeling claim that the labels will serve to inform the public and that they are “agnostic” towards GMOs. They ask, “what’s the harm?”

But a [study by David Zilberman](#), professor of agricultural and resource economics at the University of

California, Berkeley, shows otherwise. Zilberman predicts that “labeling of GMOs will make GM food less attractive to some consumers, reduce demand and make investment in this technology less appealing.”

Mandatory labeling could damage prospects for scientific research crucial for bumping up crop yields and keeping food prices low. Worldwide, that could exacerbate starvation and malnutrition, two very real public health problems when placed next to the supposed health risks of GMOs. For first-world consumers who will be able to afford food anyway, biotechnology may be [the best way to save Florida's oranges from citrus greening](#).

Consumers who still want to avoid GM foods for personal beliefs already have labels for that: the organic label and the non-GMO label. But those labels do not satisfy anti-GMO advocacy groups whose major concern is to stigmatize GMOs and rid them from the marketplace. When General Mills' Cheerios replaced ingredients made from GM corn and printed a non-GMO label on its boxes, their actions were dubbed “a marketing tool” by the Organic Connections Magazine for General Mills to profit from the latest food fad. So, anti-GMO campaigners, do you want these labels, or not?

For reference, special labeling of foods is required by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration if:

- a bioengineered food is significantly different from its traditional counterpart such that the common or usual name no longer adequately describes the new food, the name must be changed to describe the difference.
- an issue exists for the food or a constituent of the food regarding how the food is used or consequences of its use, a statement must be made on the label to describe the issue.
- a bioengineered food has a significantly different nutritional property, its label must reflect the difference.
- a new food includes an allergen that consumers would not expect to be present based on the name of the food, the presence of that allergen must be disclosed on the label.

Source: [\*FDA Guidance for Industry: Voluntary Labeling Indicating Whether Foods Have or Have Not Been Developed Using Bioengineering; Draft Guidance\*](#)

#### **Additional resources:**

- [“California GMO Food-Labeling Bill Clears Committee,”](#) Science 2.0
- [“What does a non-GMO label get you?”](#) Biofortified
- [“The GMO battle is heating up – here's why,”](#) National Geographic