

In shedding GMOs, Ben & Jerry's determined to 'stick a finger' in Monsanto's eye

For all that ice-cream maker Ben & Jerry's have been doing lately to support GMO labeling and to remove GMOs from their ice cream, one would think that they'd get a break from anti-GMO activists. Instead, the Organic Consumers Association want to boycott Ben & Jerry's until the Vermont-based ice-cream maker donates money to GMO labeling campaigns.

Some Ben & Jerry's loyal customers weren't happy with the transition to GMO-free ice cream either, once they found out that that meant some compromise with popular flavors. But Ben & Jerry's seem to be willing to put up with all the trouble, and just to protest against Monsanto. From the Organic Consumers Association (OCA):

Please sign the letter below to Ben & Jerry's co-founders, Ben Cohen and Jerry Greenfield, and social mission activism manager, Chris Miller. Tell them you won't buy one more lick of ice cream from them until Ben & Jerry's donates \$467,100 to the Washington State ballot initiative and the Vermont Right to Know campaign. It's bad enough that Ben & Jerry's offers NO organic ice cream flavors. And that the company hasn't yet eliminated genetically modified organisms (GMOs) from all of its products. But propping up its "progressive" image by telling consumers the company supports GMO labeling, while refusing to help the campaign out with what it really needs: cold hard cash? C'mon guys, you can do better.

Really? Since Ben & Jerry's [announced](#) its decision to go GMO-free in June 2013, 14 out of 50 flavors are already GMO-free. It also [renamed](#) its "iconic" fudge brownie ice-cream flavor, Chocolate Fudge Brownie, to "Food Fight Fudge Brownie" to help promote Vermont's new GMO labeling law defense fund, although it will only be sold in two locations in Vermont. It plans to donate \$1 to the fund for every scoop of the "Food Fight Fudge Brownie" ice cream sold.

"We generally feel that the genetic engineering technology that's in the marketplace at the moment ... only further industrializes agriculture, which we think is a generally bad thing," [said](#) Chris Miller, Ben & Jerry's activism manager. "We tend to support and like smaller-scale family farms, and small-holder co-ops."

But the OCA is not satisfied.

The boycott is OCA's way to blindly punish the Grocers' Manufacturers Association (GMA), and its member companies, for suing Vermont over the new GMO labeling law. Ben & Jerry's is not a member of the GMA directly, but its parent company, Unilever, is.

Unilever contributed about half a million dollars to a successful industry effort to defeat a GMO labeling initiative in California two years ago.

“Any company that pays dues to the GMA is by virtue of its membership in the GMA, supporting the GMA’s anti-labeling campaigns, including the campaign against Vermont,” an OCA representative [said](#) in a Mother Jones interview.

Ben & Jerry’s Miller [said](#) that it doesn’t deserve to be included in OCA’s boycott. While the ice-cream maker is owned by Unilever, it remains independent in its social missions as part of the agreement reached when it agreed to a takeover.

“Ben & Jerry’s has the right to speak out on issues like this and we are happy to do it and I give Unilever a lot of credit for acknowledging that and supporting Ben & Jerry’s independence,” Jerry Greenfield, one of Ben & Jerry’s co-founders, has [said](#).

Going GMO-free has not been a bed of roses either. Ben & Jerry’s new GMO-free products need to be accepted by their loyal customers who are accustomed to their favorites.

When it recently took the “Heath” out of popular flavor Coffee Heath Bar Crunch, a reference to the ingredient Heath Toffee Bars made by Hershey’s, consumers were unhappy and [wanted](#) the old flavor back:

Many who posted comments on a Coffee Heath Bar Crunch Facebook page, which is unconnected with the company, pleaded for the return of the old flavor. The only thanks came from people glad they’ll have an easier time sticking to their diet because they are unable to eat the new version, which one commenter described as dry and bitter.

Would Monsanto be impacted by Ben & Jerry’s actions? Not directly, certainly. Before Ben & Jerry’s decided to remove GMOs from its ice cream, about 80 percent of the ice cream was already GMO-free. The GMOs in ice cream come from flavoring ingredients like Hershey’s Heath Toffee Bars and caramel swirl, which typically contain corn syrup. Ben & Jerry’s has no plans to replace the milk used to make its ice cream, which comes from conventional dairy farms that often use genetically engineered corn feed, with organic milk.

For all the trouble the company has gone to to go GMO-free, it claims that safety and health had nothing to do with its decision.

“We’re not scientists,” Miller [said](#) in an interview in The Atlantic. “We don’t have a position whether GMOs are good, bad, or otherwise.”

Instead, he described Ben & Jerry’s fight against GMOs as an attempt to “stick a finger” in Monsanto’s eye.

Additional Resources:

- [“Ben & Jerry unveils non-GMO flavors,”](#) Los Angeles Times
- [“Ben & Jerry’s won’t include GE ingredients by end of year,”](#) Christian Science Monitor