

Video: Smart phones and scannable label codes could resolve GMO labeling fights

While at the Aspen Ideas Festival, New York Times journalist Andrew Revkin probed secretary of agriculture Tom Vilsack to elaborate about a way to defuse the relentless fight over labeling genetically engineered foods: through the use of smart phones and scannable label codes. Below is a video clip of Vilsack's response by Revkin: Vilsack calls for a 21st-century answer to the 20th-century debate over GMO foods:

The way to go, long-term, is to embrace a 21st-century answer to this problem... – an extended bar code or some mechanism [through which] consumers who are interested in all the information about a product could obtain it fairly easily, either through their smartphone or through a scanner that would be available in grocery stores. That way you wouldn't create a misimpression about the safety of a product, which could happen depend on how something was labeled.

Revkin sent the video clip to others focused on clarifying food benefits and risks. One response came from [David Ropeik](#), the risk communication consultant who recently [pressed](#) big food companies to embrace GMO labeling:

Secretary Vilsack's idea, which is also being explored by some companies in the food industry dissatisfied with the political status quo, seems to provide just what supporters of labeling are asking for, consumer choice. But it probably won't satisfy what many labeling advocates actually want, though some deny it, which is to scare people away from buying products with GM ingredients and thereby attack the entire technology itself. Certainly this idea puts the labeling advocates on the defensive, making it harder for them to say they are only for consumer choice and still fight this approach. This approach forces them to be more direct, more open and honest, about the values-based reasons they oppose GM food; that it fuels commercial scale agriculture, that it produces profits for big rich companies that are harming "nature," etc.

Revkin says that he is a "big fan of transparency, but also of science," so this idea to "use new information pathways to reveal layers of information about products while limiting the change of distortion" appeals to him.

I agree with Ropeik that foes of big agriculture will reject this approach to labeling, but I see it moving forward regardless. This is just one of many ways in which code-scanning technology will open up new levels of understanding about products. ... Web portals and phone apps like [Fooducate](#) are just scratching the surface of what's possible. Bring it on.

Additional Resources:

- ["No science-based reason to justify mandatory GMO labeling, study concludes,"](#) Genetic Literacy

Project

- [“Label food, but do it right: Scare-based labels hurt everybody,” MIT Technology Review](#)