

Debate: Are “Non GMO” labels deceptive?

The Non-GMO Project is a non-profit organization that provides [“North America's only third party verification and labeling for non-GMO \(genetically modified organism\) food and products.”](#)

You may have seen its seal on various products in supermarkets, particularly at Whole Foods. [The organization works with three companies or technical administrators](#) including SCS Global Services to evaluate if products comply with its standards. Most recently, it has expanded its labeling services to include restaurants and delis.

The Non-GMO Project claims to verify more than 20,000 products. “We currently have more than 2,200 participating brands, and are receiving an average of 70-80 new verification inquiries every week,” says Megan Westgate, Executive Director of the Non-GMO Project, was recently [quoted](#) as saying. The organization claims sales of its verified products tops \$7 billion annually.

For those concerned about consuming GMOs, this voluntary label, together with products that exist under the USDA's organic label, provides many options. For those who oppose mandatory labeling of GMOs, the label provides an example of how voluntary labeling can work without imposing costs on others.

However, a seemingly grey area exists when a product is labeled as non-GMO, yet a GMO counterpart does not exist. For example, should an avocado be labeled as non-GMO if GMO avocados don't exist? What about salt? Crushed tomatoes? A [recent article](#) highlighted that some brands of popcorn are advertised as not containing genetically modified corn when there is no genetically modified corn of the popcorn variety on the market. Some people might argue that such labeling practices are misleading and dishonest; others don't have a problem with it. This article provides opinions from both perspectives.

Labeling as GMO-free is disingenuous – Jennie Schmidt

It seems to me to be disingenuous to label foods as “non-GMO” when the counterpart GMO food doesn't exist. The “Fair Packaging and Labeling Act of 1966” directs the Food and Drug Administration and the Federal Trade Commission to regulate labeling of foods and consumer commodities to “...to prevent unfair or deceptive packaging and labeling of many household consumer commodities.” I consider “non-GMO” labeling to be deceptive when the equivalent GMO product doesn't exist in the marketplace. It's akin to the claim that peanut butter is cholesterol free. Since cholesterol is produced in the liver and peanuts don't have livers, peanut butter has always been cholesterol free. To advertise it as cholesterol free is deceptive because it wasn't there to begin with.

Likewise, it's deceptive to advertise dairy products as “hormone free”. Lactation is biologically impossible without hormones, therefore all milk must have hormones. If those who support a “hormone free” label on milk are really trying to claim that the animal was not treated with recombinant bovine somatotrophin, a genetically engineered version of naturally produced BST, that's what the label should read. A 3 oz portion of milk has the same nanograms of estrogen from treated and untreated cows and the difference in the milk isn't detectable, but some people hang their hat on “hormone free”, which is nothing more than

deceptive labeling. In the case of pork or poultry, the “hormone free” label is particularly deceptive because federal law prohibits the use of hormones on these animals. The use of any hormone free label on pork and poultry products is intended to mislead consumers into thinking that the product is different and therefore worthy of a higher price.

So non-GMO. There is no such thing as a “GMO food” because genetic engineering is a plant breeding process and not a food process so I disagree with it as a premise to begin with. Furthermore, “GM” stands for genetically modified, in which case, all methods of plant breeding create GMOs. The practice of seed saving by selection of a superior ear of corn or tomato and replanting that seed or crossing that plant with another superior variety is genetically modifying the outcome in the next generation of that crop. The domestication of our food supply means that every food has been “GMO’d” at some point over the last 10,000 years. Non-GMO food labels then are singling out a particular plant breeding process and disregarding the fact that traditional or mutational breeding used by organic and conventional plant breeders also create “GMOs”.

But here we are, singling out genetic engineering as the only process to be labeled. There are 8 crops that have been genetically engineered that are on the market: corn (field and sweet), soybeans, cotton, canola, alfalfa, sugar beets, papaya and squash. So there exists a counterpart in these 8 crops that is non-GMO and can be truthfully labeled as such using the non-GMO voluntary verification process.

What deceives the consumer is the use of non-GMO in products that are not created through genetic engineering, things like peppercorns, olive oil, parsley, basil, millet, barley, tomatoes, flavor spritzers, coconut milk, sushi, shiitake mushrooms, sunflower seeds, arugula, quinoa, Himalayan pink salt rock, chia seeds, and a host of other products that are pricier than their equivalent counterparts that are also and have always been non-GMO. Advertising what was never there to begin with is a deceptive practice. Non-GMO labeling already exists; it’s called “certified organic”.

To be fair and to ensure that consumers are fully informed, shouldn’t all foods be labeled by their plant breeding type? I would submit to you that organic foods created by chemical or radiation mutagenesis plant breeding techniques should be labeled as such. After all, doesn’t the consumer have the “right to know” this? Or isn’t it hypocritical to want to know one but not the other?

Labeling as GMO-free is acceptable – Layla Katirae

There are several reasons the practice of labeling items as non-GMO, when the GMO counterpart doesn’t exist, is OK with me. The first is that I advocate for voluntary labeling of GMOs. I don’t think I can be annoyed when companies exert that right, as misleading as their labeling behavior may be. The label is factual—the item is GMO-free—but it’s just “gimmicky”.

Second, there may be a point in time when a GMO counterpart to the product may exist, such as [apples should the GM Arctic Apple be approved](#). If an applesauce company has its GMO-free label already in place, it will be ahead of the market.

Third, I consider it the buyer’s responsibility to be informed. If customers are willing to spend extra on GM-

free strawberries when there aren't GM strawberries on the market in the first place, they aren't being smart shoppers. In the same way that you spend time researching which cell-phone plan you should select and reading all the reviews, shouldn't you do the same research when it comes to your food, particularly if you're committing to buying your everyday groceries under a label that costs more?

The final, and most important reason in my mind, is that I consider the entire premise of the label to be misleading, so this is a minor issue to be concerned with. To elaborate on this later point, I encourage you to visit the Non-GMO Project's website, particularly [its section outlining the "facts" surrounding GMOs](#). It includes numerous misleading statements in an attempt to convince consumers that the GMO-free label is necessary:

- *"None of the GMO traits currently on the market offer increased yield, drought tolerance, enhanced nutrition, or any other consumer benefit."* I think that [farmers in Hawaii](#) whose papaya crops have been saved through biotechnology would disagree.
- *"Most developed nations do not consider GMOs to be safe."* [Major scientific organizations](#) in developed nations disagree, including scientific organizations from European Union, USA, Australia, and the WHO.
- *"Some ingredients that seem low-risk may have less-visible high-risk ingredients. Take, for example, dried fruit. Raisins and similar fruit are sometimes packed with a small quantity of oil to keep them moist. This oil, when used, is sometimes high-GMO-risk."* This statement highlights how misleading the whole premise of GMO-labeling can be. [Refined oils do not have the transgenic protein or DNA](#). As such, there is absolutely no difference between oil derived from a GMO or from a conventional crop. So why would this product require labeling? Because there's opposition towards a processing technique? If so, then [why aren't plants derived through mutagenesis labeled](#)? It makes no sense...

The list goes on and on, including "facts" about superweeds, Agent Orange pesticides, lawsuits against farmers, etc. With so much disingenuous information that needs to be clarified, I think that the labeling of a banana as GMO-free is the least disingenuous of all, because after all, it's true. I consider it analogous to worrying about the paint on a wall that is crumbling down.

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