

If GMOs are safe, why aren't they labeled? Straight answer to a valid question

Opponents of GMOs have refocused their initial efforts from claiming that GM foods are unsafe to now advocating that everyone has a “right to know” what is in their food. This strategic shift is not new.

Proponents of the “Right to Know GMO” labeling movement contend that their aim is not to distort the issue by suggesting that non-GMO foods are healthier or nutritionally superior to the modified foods. Thus, the GMO “right to know” movement is now inline with the scientific consensus that GMOs are safe.

Rather, they advocate that labeling is beneficial because consumers have a basic right to know whether or not their food contains ingredients that are genetically modified. In tactically reframing the debate, the GMO-labeling proponents have asked a reasonable question: if GMOs are safe, then why are many [scientist and science publications](#) and even [liberal newspapers](#) in the United States opposed to GMO labeling?

The “right to know” centers on the valid argument that the GMO labels would empower consumers and allow them to make a choice. This seemingly appeals to our senses and our personal rights in a democratic society. After all, if GMOs are nutritionally equivalent to non-GMO or organic foods, what are the opponents to GMO labeling afraid of and why aren't they more transparent?

Many scientists and the food industry contend that a GMO label would potentially confuse customers and mislead them into believing that crops grown from genetically engineered seeds are “second-class” foods that should be avoided. The Food and Drug Administration has a labeling law in place for changes that matter, such as what it considers “material” changes to nutrition, whether positive or negative (e.g. trans fats are labeled because they are linked to cardiovascular disease; Similarly, products with peanuts and aspartame also demand labeling because of the potential adverse health affects if consumed by individuals with nut-allergies or phenylketonuria, a genetically inherited disease.).It specifically addressed the labeling of GM foods in a 1992 policy statement, still in effect today:

...foods, such as fruits, vegetables, grains, and their byproducts, derived from plant varieties developed by the new methods of genetic modification are regulated within the existing framework of the act, FDA's implementing regulations, and current practice, utilizing an approach identical in principle to that applied to foods developed by traditional plant breeding. The regulatory status of a food, irrespective of the method by which it is developed, is dependent upon objective characteristics of the food and the intended use of the food (or its components). The method by which food is produced or developed may in some cases help to understand the safety or nutritional characteristics of the finished food. However, the key factors in reviewing safety concerns should be the characteristics of the food product, rather than the fact that the new methods are used.

In sum, the FDA has indicated that the labeling of GMO foods is unwarranted because it does not pose a risk to consumers, regardless of one's genetic background. The absence of GMO labeling on food

products does not pose as a health risk, thus does not necessitate their labeling and could in fact mislead consumers.

If the FDA changes its policy and mandates the labeling of GMO products, it could open the legal flood-gate to superfluous labels that do not impact the safety and nutritional quality of foods, many of which could be misinterpreted by consumers, especially under a barrage of scare related advertising by special interest groups that could benefit if a product is seen as less nutritious or harmful.

For example, some consumers might want to know if their broccoli was harvested by workers making a livable wage or under the age of fourteen. Others might demand labels that indicate if their food was produced on a farm that used crop rotation or energy unsustainably. Others, purportedly concerned about global warming, might believe they have a right to know how many miles a food was transported to their grocery store. Such frivolous labels might empower consumers to make a more informed decision about what they purchase, but similar to GMO labels, the labels would do nothing to further protect the health of individuals.

With the FDA labeling door open and with no safety or health standard as a check and balance, a case could be made that each demand would under law need to be honored, setting off chaos in the food market. Labeling of GMO foods would ultimately lead consumers to the erroneous conclusion that these foods are unsafe or nutritionally inadequate. That's the contention of many scientists and editorial boards at major publications who have examined the question. It is time to move beyond the GMO labeling debate and focus on more important aspects that relate to our health, access to quality food and sustainable agriculture.

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