

GMO labeling may be more about marketing than transparency

For years, activists have demanded the labeling of food containing genetically engineered ingredients based on a claim that it would allow consumers to [“make informed choices about our food.”](#)

Relying on data showing a majority of Americans supporting such mandatory labels, and citing other countries that already have them, these groups claim that consumers have the “right to know”.

Now [a peer-reviewed study](#) published in the *Journal of Law, Medicine & Ethics*, challenges the notion that such a label would actually allow consumers to be more informed about their food. The study is somewhat limited due to its sample size and only represents law students and law professors, but the school itself represents a wide diversity of students and staff.

Analyzing 185 respondents to a survey about food labels from the California Western School of Law, researchers found that mandatory GMO labels would make consumers concerned about their health, safety, and the environment. These results appear to [contradict research from the University of Vermont](#) that such a label would not be viewed as a warning by consumers.

Products labeled as containing GMOs were rated lower by consumers than products with non/low-fat labels or products with organic, natural, or non-GMO labels. Organic, natural, and non-GMO labeled foods were rated higher in consumers minds than products labeled either low or non-fat.

In addition, consumers also rated both organic and conventional farmers higher than GMO farmers in the areas of health, safety, and the environment. Even the motives of farmers who grow GM crops were ranked lower than conventional and organic farmers.

“The responses that GMO labeled food is less safe than food with other labels suggests a disconnect between consumer attitudes and the scientific consensus,” the authors wrote, noting that the American Association for the Advancement of Science and the American Medical Association have issued statements that genetically engineered crops pose no more risk than other conventionally grown or organic food and that special labeling is not justified. “Thus,” they wrote, “participants indicated an association of health, safety and environmental friendliness with labeling that does not align with the positions of major scientific and medical associations.”

Because many consumers have expressed worry about ingesting foreign proteins or allergens, the researchers compared reactions to sugar and apples. Sugar does not contain proteins, and organic apples have been found to have a higher risk of some food-borne pathogens. It was found that the type of product did not matter to consumers, labels had the most significant impact on their assumptions about the product.

But what about that study from Vermont showing the opposite to be true? I have been unable to locate a published version of Jane Kolodinsky's survey results, only press releases put out by her university for her presentation. But emails I received from a freedom of information act request may provide some evidence of bias on her part.

Along with dozens of email updates from Just Label It and Food Democracy Now, below is an email to the office of Vermont Governor Peter Shumlin. Kolodinsky requested a quote from the governor to go along with her presentation showing praise for her work, going so far to even draft a quote for the governor to use. Kolodinsky's email states that the purpose of her research was to provide evidence that Vermont's labeling law was "based on a consumer's right to know".

From: Jane Kolodinsky [<mailto:Jane.Kolodinsky@uvm.edu>]
Sent: Thursday, July 23, 2015 5:21 PM
To: Coriell, Scott
Subject: New study from UVM

Scott;

I am presenting a paper at the Agricultural and Applied Economics meetings in San Francisco on Monday morning. The Center for Rural Studies is going to do a press release (embargoed until noon, Monday). Attached is my DRAFT presentation and the bones of the press release. Do you think the Governor would add a quote much like the one in the presentation (on that slide I will say something like "While the media spun VT's passing the GM labeling law to use the words "warning," neither the Governor's comments were based on consumer's right to know.").

I am looking for a quote something like, "Vermont passed the labeling law to insure that citizens know what is in their food. This study provides evidence that we were right--the labeling will serve to provide information so people can make informed choices" or something like that.

The governor's office declined her request for a quote, "Given that the law is in litigation". Litigation where the plaintiffs are claiming that the mandatory labels would appear to be a warning label in the eyes of consumers.

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The survey results from the California law school also run counter to claims made by the [Environmental Working Group](#) and [Consumer Reports](#) that its campaigns to promote organic food should not discourage people from eating conventional fruits and vegetables. The authors hypothesize that the results may be caused by marketing campaigns to convince consumers that GMOs pose risks. “It is possible that consumers are calling for labels to confirm what they are learning through marketing campaigns,” they explain.

Consumer Report's disclaimer at the bottom of their special report on pesticides.

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Consumer Report's disclaimer at the bottom of their special report on pesticides.

The idea that food labels can be misleading is not a new one. [Many of the same groups](#) that are lobbying for mandatory GMO labels criticize free range, cage free, and natural labels as misleading. Ross Pomeroy at Real Clear Science explains how the *no sugar added* label is misleading to consumers:

Every bottle of Naked Juice proudly claims “No Sugar Added.” Though technically true, the phrase is marketing wordplay designed to mask the fact that their juice already contains copious amounts of sugar, as much as a similar-sized soft drink! The type of sugar in Naked Juice, called fructose, normally isn't that bad when consumed in actual fruit, which contains fibers to counteract the negative metabolic effects of sugar. But in Naked Juice, those fibers are mostly absent, basically making Naked Juice a \$4 can of soda. Naked Juice is easy to pick on, but many other companies are guilty of sneakily using the “No Added Sugar” slogan as well.

The organic industry has spent millions of dollars over the years to convince consumers that food containing genetically engineered ingredients are inherently more risky than their own products, in contradiction to the [overwhelming scientific consensus](#). Its own demands that misleading labels be removed from products makes it fairly clear how aware they are of the power such labels hold over

consumers. Is the fight to label ingredients based on the breeding method of seed really about your “right to know”, or about convincing people that organic cookies are healthier than a genetically engineered papaya?

Stephan Neidenbach is a middle school teacher, husband, and father living in Annapolis, MD. He holds a BS in business administration from Salisbury University and a MS in Instructional Technology from University of Maryland University College. He started and runs the Facebook page [We Love GMOs and Vaccines](#), follow him on twitter [@welovegv](#).