Genetically modified organisms, otherwise known as GMOs, or genetically engineered food products have become a contentious issue for some consumers. This document examines the ongoing debate over whether food containing GMOs should be labeled. In Florida, bills requiring mandatory labeling of GMOs have been introduced during at least two sessions and many anticipate similar initiatives in future legislative sessions. If passed, this type of legislation typically requires GMOs or processed foods made with GMOs to be labeled as “genetically engineered” or “contains genetically engineered ingredients.” Consumers often turn to the University of Florida and Extension faculty to help them understand and make decisions about complex issues. This fact sheet provides background information and presents pro- and anti-labeling law arguments that will allow you to discuss the issue from multiple perspectives.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

DEFINITION

The 2014 Florida House Bill 1 and Senate Bill 558 both contained the term genetically engineered food, which is defined as food that consists of, contains or is produced from an organism or organisms in which the genetic material has been changed through cell fusion or in-vitro nucleic acid techniques.

A GMO is typically one that has new traits or characteristics introduced by modern biotechnology, such as Roundup Ready Corn 2. Hybrid corn or corn developed through artificial selection, however, is not considered a GMO.

ISSUE ROOT

There is currently no regulation of GMO food labeling in Florida or at the national level.

AUTHORITY

The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) is responsible for assuring that foods sold in the U.S. are safe, wholesome and properly labeled (FDA, 2013). The Federal Food, Drug and Cosmetic Act grants authority for food labeling to the FDA (FDA, 2001).

PREVALENCE IN FOOD SUPPLY

It is estimated that 60-70% of processed food items in the grocery store contain at least one ingredient derived from a GM crop (Byrne, 2010).

MOST COMMON GM CROPS IN THE US

Soybean, corn, cotton and canola (Byrne, 2010).

EXISTING LABELING POLICY

Through the FDA’s interpretation, the Federal Food, Drug and Cosmetic Act requires labeling in cases where the absence of such information might: pose special health or environmental risks, mislead the consumer in light of other statements made on the label, or in cases where a consumer might assume that a food, because of its similarity to other food, has characteristics of that food when in fact it does not (Eenennaam, Chassy, Kalaitzandonakes, & Redick, 2014).

The FDA requires labeling of genetically engineered foods if the food has a significantly different nutritional property; if the new food includes an allergen that consumers would not expect to be present or if a food contains a toxicant beyond acceptable limits. The FDA has proposed voluntary guidelines for labeling food that does or does not contain genetically engineered ingredients (Byrne, 2010).

SIMILAR TERMS

Genetically modified, genetically modified organism, transgenic, biotech, bioengineered, or products made with modern biotechnology.
PROONENT POSITION

Those in favor of labeling emphasize consumers’ right to know what is in their food as an important attribute of a democratic society. Proponents typically include organic farmers, environmental groups, consumers, activists, and the natural food industry.

PRO-LABELING ARGUMENTS

Mandatory labeling should be implemented because:

- Ninety-three percent of Florida residents agree or strongly agree that GMOs should be labeled (Pounds, 2014).
- People should have a choice in the types of products they purchase and consume.
- Consumers have a right to know about the composition of their food.
- Consumers could avoid GMOs to account for any uncertainty surrounding future health and environmental concerns.
- At least 40 other countries have established some form of mandatory labeling law (Hogan, 2012).
- Mandatory GMO labeling would enhance the United States’ capacity to export to countries that have GMO regulations.

OPPONENT POSITION

Those against labeling are concerned about the increased cost of food and the logistical challenges of labeling with no corresponding improvement in human health or food safety. Opponents typically include agricultural and biotech interests, retailers, and the processed food industry.

ANTI-LABELING ARGUMENTS

Mandatory labeling should not be implemented because:

- There are voluntary labeling measures providing consumers with non-GMO choices.
- Consumers can purchase certified organic foods, which cannot be produced with genetically modified ingredients.
- Consumer options could decrease if retailers eliminate GMOs due to perceived consumer aversion (Carter & Gruère 2003).
- There is no other food production process requires labeling.
- It could be misleading to consumers, implying that GMOs pose a food safety risk when there is no evidence of harm.
- Labeling is not needed to identify GMOs containing animal genes as none are currently on the market or under review.
- Food costs could rise due to labeling, monitoring, and/or food reformulation necessary to remove GM ingredients.

REFERENCES


