

US cos. push voluntary labels on modified foods

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This July 29, 2013 file photo shows produce on a Whole Foods paper bag in Andover, Mass. Large food companies are trying to head off state-by-state efforts to enact mandatory labeling of genetically modified ingredients by proposing new voluntary labels nationwide. The food industry and farm groups are pushing Congress to pass legislation that would require the Food and Drug Administration to create guidelines for the new labels, which food manufacturers could use. (AP Photo/Elise Amendola, File)

America's large food companies are trying to head off efforts to enact mandatory labeling of genetically modified ingredients by proposing new voluntary labels nationwide.

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A federal standard for voluntary labels would get [food manufacturers](#) off the hook if any U.S. states pass laws requiring mandatory labeling. Recent ballot initiatives in California and Washington failed, but several state legislatures are considering labeling requirements and opponents of engineered ingredients are aggressively pushing new laws in several states.

There's very little science that says genetically engineered foods are unsafe. But opponents say there's too much unknown about the seeds that are altered in labs to have certain traits, and that consumers have a right to know if they are eating them. The seeds are engineered for a variety of reasons, many of them to resist herbicides or insects.

One of the biggest stumbling blocks to securing a massive free trade agreement between the United States and Europe is a sharp disagreement on genetically modified foods.

The European Union has some of the strictest regulations in the world for [genetically modified organisms](#), or GMOs, requiring extensive testing, labeling and monitoring of all food products whose DNA has been manipulated in labs.

Pamela Bailey, president and CEO of the Grocery Manufacturers Association, the U.S. food industry's main trade group, said the decision

on labels should rest with the Food and Drug Administration, which is set up to assess the safety of foods.

The grocery manufacturers announced a partnership with 28 farm and food industry groups Thursday to push for the legislation. The groups include the National Corn Growers Association, the National Restaurant Association and the National Beverage Association, all industries that have seen pushback from consumers over modified ingredients.

The groups say mandatory labels would cause confusion, misleading consumers into thinking that the ingredients are unsafe. The labels could also be inconsistent from state to state, the groups said.

The industries are lobbying members of Congress to introduce and pass a bill that would require FDA to do a safety review of new genetically engineered ingredients before they are sold in food. So far, FDA has not found safety issues with modified ingredients.

The companies are facing pressure from retailers as the conversation about modified ingredients has grown louder. Whole Foods announced last year that it plans to label GMO products in all its U.S. and Canadian stores within five years.

And some companies have decided to just remove the ingredients altogether, so no labels will be necessary. General Mills recently announced it would no longer use GMOs in its original Cheerios recipe.

It is unclear whether there is support for voluntary labels in Congress. Many lawmakers from farm states have defended the technology.

The final farm bill, which Congress passed and sent to President Barack Obama this week, does not weigh in on [genetically modified ingredients](#).

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