Genetically engineered food labeling examined in new paper

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(Medical Xpress)—As consumers and legislators across the nation grapple with whether to require labeling of genetically engineered foods and food products, a new "issues paper" addressing that topic is being released today by the Council for Agricultural Science and Technologies (CAST).

The paper, titled "The Potential Impacts of Mandatory Labeling for Genetically Engineered Foods in the United States," examines the scientific, legal and economic ramifications of requiring that food containing genetically engineered ingredients be labeled as such.

It comes on the heels of the April 23 passage by the Vermont legislature of a bill that would make that state the first to mandate labeling of "GMO" or genetically engineered foods.

Lead author on the paper is Alison Van Eenennaam, a geneticist and Cooperative Extension specialist in animal genomics and biotechnology at the University of California, Davis.

"Mandating process-based food labeling is a very complex topic with nuanced marketing, economic and trade implications depending upon how the labeling laws are written and how the market responds," Van Eenennaam said.

Co-authors on the paper are Bruce M. Chassy, a food science professor emeritus at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign; Nicholas

Kalaitzandonakes, an economics professor at the University of Missouri, Columbia; and lawyer Thomas P. Redick from Global Environmental Ethics Counsel, LLC.

Noting that such labeling would be based not on differences in the content of the crop or food product but on the way it was produced, Van Eenennaam and her co-authors conclude that there is no scientific reason for singling out the process of genetic engineering for mandatory process-based labeling.

They maintain that voluntary labeling programs, such as the Non-GMO Project, motivated by market influences rather than government regulation, currently provide interested consumers with the choice to select non-genetically engineered foods in the United States.

They suggest that state-based labeling laws may run into legal challenges related to interstate commerce, international trade, federal authority over food labeling and First Amendment protection of "commercial speech."

In terms of economics, they project that mandatory labeling of genetically engineered foods would increase U.S. food costs. Just how much food prices might rise would depend on how food manufacturers and retailers respond to mandatory labeling.

The authors project that the impact on food prices would be substantial if food processors decide to switch to non-GMO ingredients to avoid labeling requirements, as has been the case in other countries following the introduction of mandatory GE labeling. The cost increases would be less if processors instead opt to label all of their food products as containing genetically engineered ingredients.

The paper concludes with a call for more independent, objective information to be provided to consumers and legislators on the scientific

issues, legal ramifications and economic consequences of mandatory labeling, especially in states that now have labeling initiatives on the ballot.

"This would help to move the national discussion on mandatory GE labeling from contentious claims and counterclaims to a more fact-based and informed dialog," Van Eenennaam said.

The Council for Agricultural Science and Technologies (CAST) is a nonprofit organization composed of scientific societies and individual student, company, nonprofit and associate society members. CAST assembles, interprets and communicates credible science-based information using volunteer scientific experts as authors and reviewers. That information is then made freely available to legislators, regulators, policymakers, media, the private sector and the public on the organization's website at www.cast-science.org.

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