Making a meal of GM food labelling

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In all countries in which genetically modified (GM) food is sold, such as Australia and the US, the issue of food labelling has been hotly debated.

While consumer and anti-GM groups call for better labelling of GM foods, the food industry's position is that our labelling system is good enough to allow people to choose whether to eat GM foods.

Meanwhile, consumers are confused and frustrated. So what is needed?

According to Food Standards Australia New Zealand (FSANZ), food must be labelled as genetically modified or containing GM ingredients if it or its contents have been produced using gene technology as permitted under the Commonwealth Gene Technology Act.

But there are some exceptions:

- highly refined food where the modified DNA, or proteins resulting from it, is removed during processing
- processing aids or food additives, where no modified DNA or protein resulting from it remain in the final food
- flavours where the concentration in the final food is less than 0.1%
- unintentional presence, where the ingredient is less than 1% of the food
- any foods consumed at the point of sale.

So canola oil from GM canola, imported GM soy products eaten in cafes and restaurants and beer made using adjuncts such as syrup from GM corn (where no modified DNA is present in the final product) are not labelled as GM foods.

Industry groups support this approach to labelling, saying that if a product does not contain modified DNA or protein resulting from modified DNA, then it shouldn't be labelled as a GM food. According to them, it about what's in the food, not how it is produced.

This product versus process distinction is at core of labelling issues. Although highly refined products made using gene technology are not

different in substance from their non-GM competitors, consumers who don't wish to support this technology can't identify those products which align with their values.

This idea is at the core of campaigns such as the True Food Guide, where food producers are given a "green light" if they can declare that they use no GM at any stage of production.

What do consumers look for, then?

While foods produced using gene technology on our supermarket shelves have been approved as safe to eat by FSANZ, we know that people do not choose their food based primarily on science, if at all. Our food choices are a reflection of our experiences, broader society, religion, traditions and culture among other factors.

Nowadays, many of us in western societies are being asked to consider the impact of our food choices on the environment and other people. Celebrity chefs and others encourage us to buy local, sustainable, organic, animal welfare-friendly and often GM-free products, without ever really explaining why. These labels have become a proxy for quality; shorthand for "good food" in a busy world.

These so-called "ethical" labels are largely unregulated by the government (country-of-origin labelling is an exception). "GM-free" along with "sustainable" and "organic" are claims that can be made on foods without requiring products to meet any particular standards of evidence set by the government.

In the case of organic, only producers who meet certain criteria can display an accreditation logo, one of which is no use of GM products or processes in any stage of production. ABC's The Checkout describes it nicely in the video below.

The primary means of enforcement of food labelling is via the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC), which then appeals to whether labels fulfil what the average consumer would expect from a product with that label.

Interestingly, one case brought to the ACCC suggests that "GM-free" refers to the use of GM in production, as well as the product itself, for most consumers. But "GM-free" labels can also be found on foods unlikely to contain any GM ingredients, including those made from products where there is no GM counterpart to its main ingredient.

This complex situation is highly confusing for consumers. Our current labelling regime assumes that consumers can make "informed" decisions on whether to eat or avoid GM food based on their own understandings of a label that may be present or absent, legislated or unregulated.

Research has shown that people tend to develop simple binaries (such as good/bad, natural/artificial) when choosing foods in the face of confusing information, and adapt the new information on the label to fit within decision frameworks which are more familiar to them.

Our preliminary research suggests that consumers see GM as an additive, and hence avoid processed foods or purchase organic foods, to avoid GM.

Although the current labelling regime is insufficient to fulfil some consumers' demands, questions remain about what information should be mandated, and in what form, to allow consumers to make the decisions that they wish to make as well as consideration of whose interests such labels would serve.

What is clear is that more dialogue and transparency are necessary if consumers are to actively participate in food labelling debates.