

## Bill would create organic-type labels for nonmodified foods (Update)

March 25 2015, by Mary Clare Jalonick

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Inspired by the popular "USDA organic" label, House Republicans are proposing a new government certification for foods free of genetically modified ingredients.

The idea is part of an attempt to block mandatory labeling of foods that include genetically modified organisms, or GMOs. The certification would be voluntary, says Rep. Mike Pompeo, R-Kan., who is including the idea in legislation he is introducing Wednesday.

Pompeo says a government-certified label would allow companies that want to advertise their foods as GMO-free to do so, but it would not be mandatory for others. The food industry, which backs Pompeo's bill, has strongly opposed individual state efforts to require labeling, saying labels would be misleading because GMOs are safe. The bill would also override any state laws that require the labeling.

Under the legislation, the Agriculture Department would oversee the certification, as it does with organics. But while organic foods must be USDA-certified to carry any organic label on a package, the department's non-GMO certification would not be required for every food that bills itself as free of genetically modified ingredients. The idea is that foods the department certifies as free of GMOs would have a special government label that companies could use to market their foods. User fees would pay for the program.

The bill also steps up FDA review of genetically modified foods.

Currently, food companies must comply with FDA guidance if they want to claim that foods are free of engineered ingredients.

Pompeo says inconsistent state laws would be confusing and costly for consumers and for companies. Vermont became the first state to require the labeling in 2014, and that law will go into effect next year if it survives a legal challenge from the food industry.

"We're perfectly happy to have folks to understand if there's GMOs or not in their food," Pompeo said in an interview with The Associated Press. "It is simply not the case that you can have affordable food that is safe and 1,000 different rules."

He said he is working with his party's leadership and also the Senate to try to pass the bill this year. Pompeo introduced a similar bill last year that did not include the Agriculture Department certification.

Genetically modified seeds are engineered in laboratories to have certain traits, like resistance to herbicides. The majority of the country's corn and soybean crop is now genetically modified, with much of that going to animal feed. They are also made into popular processed food ingredients like high-fructose corn syrup and soybean oil.

The FDA says GMOs on the market now are safe, but consumer advocates pushing for the labeling say shoppers have a right to know what is in their food, arguing that not enough is known about the effects of the technology. They have supported several state efforts to require labeling, with the eventual goal of having a federal standard.

Those groups quickly criticized Pompeo's approach.

"This is a faulty and disingenuous attempt to assuage consumer concern without actually giving the people the information they want and

deserve," said Andrew Kimbrell of the advocacy group Center for Food Safety. "The most effective way to provide consumers with the full universe of information about their food is through mandatory labeling, nothing less."

Scott Faber, head of the national Just Label It campaign, described the bill as a last-ditch effort by the food industry as state legislatures are considering bills around the country that would require the labeling.

According to a December Associated Press-GfK poll, two-thirds of Americans favor mandatory labeling of genetically modified foods.

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