

Food industry looks to Congress as GMO labeling law nears

February 4 2016, by Mary Clare Jalonick



In this Oct. 5, 2012, file photo, products labeled with Non Genetically Modified Organism (GMO) are sold at the Lassens Natural Foods & Vitamins store in Los Feliz district of Los Angeles. The food industry is pressuring Congress to act before the state of Vermont requires food labels for genetically modified ingredients. (AP Photo/Damian Dovarganes, File)

The food industry is pressuring Congress to act before the state of Vermont requires food labels for genetically modified ingredients.

At issue is how food companies will deal with Vermont's law, the first in the country. They could make separate food packages just for the state, label all their items with genetically modified ingredients or withdraw from the small Vermont market. The law kicks in by July, but the companies have to start making those decisions now.

The food industry wants Congress to pre-empt Vermont's law and bar mandatory labeling of genetically modified foods before it goes into effect. They argue that GMOs, or genetically modified organisms, are safe and a patchwork of state laws isn't practical.

Labeling advocates have been fighting state-by-state to enact the labeling, with the eventual goal of a national standard.

Lawmakers are divided but agree that a compromise needs to be worked out before this summer.

A look at the debate:

WHAT'S A GMO, ANYWAY?

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. Corn and soybeans are also made into popular processed food ingredients like high-fructose corn syrup, corn starch and soybean oil.

The food industry says about 75 percent to 80 percent of foods contain genetically modified ingredients.

While there is little scientific concern about the safety of those GMOs on the market, advocates for labeling say not enough is known about their risks.

THE FIGHT

The food industry has been battling the labeling advocates for several years, spending millions to fight ballot initiatives and bills in state legislatures that would require labeling of genetically modified foods. They have also challenged Vermont's law in court.

Industry-backed legislation that passed the House last year would have blocked any such state laws. But that bill has stalled in the Senate.

The Food and Drug Administration has said GMOs on the market now are safe, and the federal government does not support mandatory labels. But supporters of labeling counter that consumers have a right to know what's in their foods.

So far, Vermont is the only state set to require labeling. Maine and Connecticut have passed similar laws, but those measures don't take effect unless neighboring states follow suit.

OTHER IDEAS

Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack hasn't taken sides on the issue, but he has previously suggested some sort of digital labeling that consumers could access with their smart phones or in-store scanners.

The food industry has had similar ideas, introducing voluntary digital labels last year that could provide consumers with detailed information about products. Information could also be accessed by an online search.

Labeling advocates say digital labels discriminate against people who don't have smart phones, computers or the know-how to use them.

COMPANIES GO AHEAD

As Congress has stalled on the issue, some companies are already prepared to deal with the Vermont law.

Campbell Soup said earlier this month it now supports mandatory national labeling for products containing genetically modified ingredients, and that it will stop backing efforts opposing the disclosures.

The company said that about three-quarters of its products contain GMOs, and released a mock-up of the label it would use to comply if Vermont's law goes into effect. It says "Partially produced with genetic engineering" in small print at the bottom.

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