

Labels on genetically modified foods? Not so fast

March 1 2016, by Mary Clare Jalonick

States could no longer require labeling of genetically modified foods under legislation approved by a Senate panel.

The Senate Agriculture Committee voted 14-6 Tuesday to prevent the labeling on packages of foods that include genetically modified organisms, or GMOs. Vermont is set to require such labels this summer, and other states are considering similar laws.

Senators have said they want to find a compromise on the labeling issue before Vermont's law kicks in. Sen. Pat Roberts, R-Kan., chairman of the panel, said a patchwork of state laws would be a "wrecking ball" that could be costly for agriculture, food companies and ultimately consumers.

"Now is not the time for Congress to make food more expensive for anybody," Roberts said.

The bill would block Vermont's law and create new voluntary labels for companies that want to use them on food packages that contain genetically modified ingredients.

The legislation is similar to a bill the House passed last year. The food industry has strongly backed both bills, saying GMOs 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.

Passage won't be as easy in the Senate, where 60 votes will be needed to overcome a certain filibuster. Vermont Sens. Patrick Leahy and Bernie Sanders have both strongly opposed efforts to block their state's law.

Roberts and Stabenow have worked to find a compromise that can pass the Senate. But those negotiations broke down before the committee vote, and Roberts said the panel needed to move quickly ahead of the Vermont law. Both said they are still negotiating and hope to find agreement.

Stabenow said that for the legislation to receive broad enough support to pass the Senate, "it must contain a pathway to a national system of mandatory disclosure that provides consumers the information they need and want to make informed choices."

Three Democrats voted for Roberts' bill: North Dakota Sen. Heidi Heitkamp, Indiana Sen. Joe Donnelly and Minnesota Sen. Amy Klobuchar.

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 the Food and Drug Administration says they are safe and 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. Among supporters of labeling are many organic companies that are barred by

law from using modified ingredients in their foods.

Those groups said they are holding out hope for a compromise on the Senate floor.

"We remain hopeful that the Senate will craft a national, mandatory GMO labeling system that provides consumers with basic factual information about their food," said Scott Faber of the Environmental Working Group.

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