

Senate backs bill to label genetically modified food

July 8 2016, by Donna Cassata And Mary Clare Jalonick

Food packages nationwide would for the first time be required to carry labels listing genetically modified ingredients under legislation the Senate backed Thursday.

The vote was 63-30 for the bipartisan measure, which would compel foods that include [genetically modified](#) organisms, or GMOs, to carry a text label, a symbol or an electronic code readable by smartphone. Advocates for labeling and the food industry, which has fought mandatory labeling, have wanted to find a national solution to avoid a state-by-state patchwork of laws.

The food industry supports the Senate bill, but many labeling proponents do not. Critics say the labels should be easily readable by consumers without smartphones, and have complained that the measure lacks penalties for companies that don't comply.

"It is time for us to provide certainty in the marketplace," said Sen. Pat Roberts, R-Kan., chairman of the Agriculture Committee, who brokered the compromise bill with the panel's top Democrat, Michigan Sen. Debbie Stabenow.

The measure now heads to the House, where its fate is less certain. That chamber has voted to make labeling voluntary.

Senate approval came over the strong objections of Vermont's senators—presidential contender Bernie Sanders, an independent, and

Democrat Patrick Leahy. They argued that the measure falls short, especially compared to tougher labeling requirements in their state that kicked in last Friday.

They said the federal government shouldn't run roughshod over a state's rules, pre-empting Vermont's law, and the federal requirements would not be consumer-friendly. Sanders called Vermont's law "a triumph for consumers" that was shaping up as a hollow victory, with the Senate bill trumping his state's law.

Sen. Thom Tillis, R-N.C., said a federal statute would save consumers money and avoid imposing Vermont's law on other states, or a grab bag of state laws.

"What about California? What about my state of North Carolina, all the other ones?" Tillis asked.

Genetically modified foods are plants or animals that have had genes copied from other plants or animals inserted into their DNA. While farmers have been selectively breeding plants for centuries, this manipulation is done in a lab, speeding up the process by transferring a gene from one plant or animal to another. The engineering is done to create certain traits, like resistance to herbicides.

The bulk of the nation's genetically engineered crops are corn and soybeans that are eaten by livestock or made into popular processed food ingredients like cornstarch, soybean oil or [high-fructose corn syrup](#). Only a handful of genetically engineered fruits and vegetables are available in the produce aisle, including Hawaiian papaya, some zucchini and squash and some sweet corn.

The food industry says 75 percent to 80 percent of foods contain genetically modified ingredients—most of those corn and soy-based.

The Food and Drug Administration says they are safe to eat.

The Agriculture Department would have two years to write the rules.

The legislation encompasses some foods that were exempted from the Vermont law, but it also allows the Agriculture Department to determine how much of a "bioengineered substance" must be present to require a GMO label. Labeling advocates say many foods wouldn't be labeled if the department sets a high threshold.

"The idea that people would need to walk around the grocery store scanning product codes just to find out what's in the food they're buying is ridiculous and unfair," said Sen. Dick Durbin of Illinois, the No. 2 Democrat in the Senate, a foe of the measure.

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