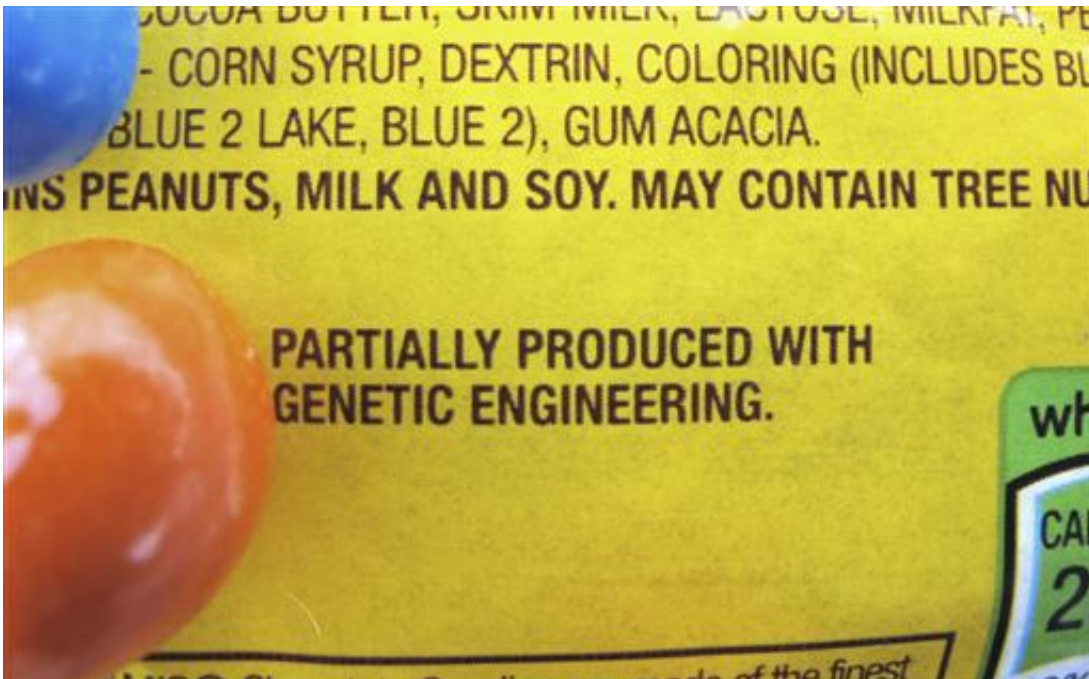


Uncertainty looms as Vermont becomes 1st state to label GMOs

July 1 2016, by Dave Gram



This April 8, 2016 file photo shows a new disclosure statement which reads, "PARTIALLY PRODUCED WITH GENETIC ENGINEERING" on a package of candy in Montpelier, Vt. On Friday, July 1, 2016, Vermont will become the first U.S. state to require the labeling of foods made with genetically modified ingredients. (AP Photo/Lisa Rathke)

At Mehuron's Supermarket in Waitsfield, manager Bruce Hyde Jr. said he and his team were ready for the state's new law requiring genetically modified foods to be labeled as such. But uncertainties abound.

Hyde said stores like his have to rely on national food companies to apply labels to products with genetically modified ingredients. But Congress could act next week on a less stringent federal bill that would pre-empt Vermont's, which went into effect Friday.

"It could all be changed a month from now," Hyde said.

Democratic Gov. Peter Shumlin and other state leaders have strongly supported Vermont's labeling law, saying consumers have a right to know what's in their food. They planned a noontime celebration of the law.

Shumlin encouraged supporters of the new law to take to social media using the hashtag WeLabeledGMOs to post pictures of properly labeled products and comment on the law.

"Let's show the rest of America that giving consumers the right to know what is in their food isn't that hard or scary, it's simply the right thing to do," Shumlin said in a statement.

Food producers argue there's no science supporting any difference between foods that are genetically modified and those that are not. They also say they don't want to end up with a patchwork of multiple state regulatory schemes.

Industry groups including the Grocery Manufacturers Association have sued to block the Vermont law, arguing that the labeling requirement amounts to compelled speech in violation of the First Amendment. The litigation is pending in federal court.

GMA spokesman Roger Lowe said the group hopes Congress acts quickly on compromise legislation offered last week by Republican and Democratic leaders on the Senate Agriculture Committee.

"Since the state of Vermont has given companies 30 days to correct any alleged GMO labeling violations, the immediate impact, if any, on companies in July should be limited," Lowe said.

Vermont leaders including Shumlin and Sen. Bernie Sanders, a Democratic presidential candidate, oppose the legislation in Congress. They point to its provision delaying implementation by two more years and to the fact that food producers would be allowed to use coded labels readable by smartphones. They argue that those without smartphones could remain uninformed about whether the food they're buying has been produced with genetic engineering.

Larger grocers as well as national food companies like General Mills and Campbell Soup Co. said they're prepared for Vermont's law, which was passed in 2014 with a two-year window for companies to prepare.

Campbell Soup Co. has "already printed and shipped (product labeled) to comply with Vermont's law," said company spokesman Thomas Hushen. The company remains "committed to label on-package" throughout the country.

Coca-Cola spokesman Ben Sheidler said that the company was making a "good-faith effort" to comply with the law but that some lower-volume products and packages "could be temporarily unavailable in Vermont."

Maine-based regional chain Hannaford Supermarkets has new labels for any store-brand products it carries that contain genetically modified ingredients. Those labels would not just be going to Vermont but also would be sent throughout Hannaford's distribution system, said spokesman Eric Blom.

At the Hunger Mountain Co-op in Montpelier, which specializes in natural foods and local products, general manager Kari Bradley said it

was frustrating that a state law the co-op has supported since it was before lawmakers in Montpelier might be erased from the books by federal action.

Bradley said leaders of other food co-ops around the country had cheered Vermont on. "They just don't have the political climates in their states to move this forward."

He said the federal bill is "not a solution that's in the spirit of the Vermont law."

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