

Tiny Vermont brings food industry to its knees on GMO labels

19 March 2016, by Lisa Rathke



In this Dec. 15, 2007 file photo, a box of General Mills' Cheerios is seen on a shelf at a Shaw's Supermarket in Gloucester, Mass. General Mills says it will start labeling products across the country that contain genetically modified ingredients to comply with a law that is set to go into effect in Vermont. The maker of Cheerios cereal, Progresso soups and Yoplait yogurt notes it is impractical to label its products for just one state, so the disclosures required by Vermont starting in July 2016 will be on its products throughout the U.S. (AP Photo/Lisa Poole, file)

General Mills' announcement on Friday that it will start labeling products that contain genetically modified ingredients to comply with a Vermont law shows food companies might be throwing in the towel, even as they hold out hope Congress will find a national solution.

Tiny Vermont is the first state to require such labeling, effective July 1. Its fellow New England states of Maine and Connecticut have passed laws that require such labeling if other nearby states put one into effect.

The U.S. Senate voted 48-49 Wednesday against a bill that would have blocked such state laws.

The food industry is holding out hope that Congress will prevent states from requiring such labeling. Some companies say they plan to follow Vermont's law, while others are considering pulling their products from the small state.

The Grocery Manufacturers Association has called for a national solution instead of what it says is a patchwork of confusing and costly state labeling laws. It has also challenged Vermont's law in federal court, asking that the law be blocked until the case is resolved. That request was denied and is on appeal.

General Mills' "announcement is the latest example of how Vermont's looming labeling mandate is a serious problem for businesses," the association said in a statement. "Food companies are being forced to make decisions on how to comply and having to spend millions of dollars. One small state's law is setting labeling standards for consumers across the country."

Nestle supports the mandatory informed disclosure of the presence of GMO ingredients in food and beverages and believes it's best done by a uniform national approach, but will abide by state laws if they come into effect, according to spokeswoman Edie Burge.

Food giant General Mills Inc. said Friday it will start nationwide labeling on products that contain genetically modified ingredients, saying it's not practical to do so for just one state. Campbell Soup Co. is also printing new national labels in preparation for Vermont's law, although it opposes state-by-state labeling requirements.

"This shows that the United States has the capacity to join the 64 other countries that already require GMO labeling," Vermont Gov. Peter Shumlin said Friday. "I urge other companies to follow the lead of General Mills and extend this right to their customers nationwide as well."

Other companies are weighing their options.

Herr Foods Inc., a midsize snack food company based in Philadelphia, is considering pulling its products from Vermont if the law takes effect, said Daryl Thomas, senior vice president for sales and marketing.

"Just the logistics, the expense are horrendous," he said.

"You'd have to duplicate that if any state went along with its own regulations and then multiple it again, again, and again times however many other states chose to have their own requirements," he said.

In addition, he said, ensuring the differently labeled products are sorted and distributed correctly would be difficult and costly, he said.

The food industry argues those costs will be passed to the consumer, and some independent Vermont retailers are worried how it could affect their bottom line.

"As a retailer, there's all sorts of ways that this could backfire on us as a state, and a small independent guy like myself if I've got nothing on my shelves or I've got limited (supply) and my competitors have no problem with the staying power, we're done," said Ray Bouffard, owner of Georgia Market in Georgia, Vermont.

The Food and Drug Administration says GMOs, which can include food made from seeds that were engineered in laboratories to have certain traits, are safe, but labeling advocates say not enough research has been done and they have a right to know what's in their food. They also say the use of GMOs has led to big increases in herbicide use.

A 2014 Associated Press-GfK poll found that 66 percent of Americans supported labeling of genetically modified food.

Leaders of the U.S. Senate Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry Committee said they are committed to finding a compromise.

U.S. Sen. Pat Roberts, R-Kansas, chairman of

committee, has already put forth a compromise that "will ensure consumer access to biotech information and affordable food while protecting farmers and manufacturers," spokeswoman Sarah Little said Friday.

The top Democrat on the committee, Michigan Sen. Debbie Stabenow, said that while several of her proposals have not been accepted, she still believes "we need and can achieve a policy that creates a uniform national system of disclosure ... in a way that has common sense and works for everybody," she said.

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