

Labeling Genetically Engineered Food: The Consumer's Right to Know?

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A statewide survey assessed Oregon voters' reasons for supporting or opposing a November 2002 ballot measure requiring labeling of genetically engineered (GE) foods. Of the 499 who voted on the measure, 34% supported labeling and 55% opposed it. Women, urban dwellers, and households with environmental organization membership tended to favor labeling. Reasons behind voting decisions varied widely. Consumers' right to know was a major reason for support. Cost was a major concern of the opposition. A higher percentage of those who favored labeling was "not at all likely" or "not too likely" to purchase GE-labeled food.

Key words: consumer attitudes, food, genetically engineered, genetically modified, labeling, likelihood to buy, Oregon ballot measure, organic.

Do consumers have the right to know whether the food they are buying has been genetically modified? Traditional crossbreeding has created genetically modified crops for many years. Genetic engineering now makes it possible to modify individual genes more precisely in order to grow crops with desired characteristics (Institute of Food Technologists, 2000). These genetically engineered (GE) foods began to appear in the marketplace in the mid-1990s—unbeknownst to most consumers.

Proponents of genetic modification in agriculture claim that it is a safe, valuable tool for efficiently producing more food (Jaeger, 2002). Critics claim that the safety of genetically modified foods for human health and the environment is unproven. These issues have led to questions about consumers' right to know what is in their food and how best to make this information available to them.

Labeling of biotech foods in the United States has been controversial (Korwek, 2000). Such labeling is required in the European Union and several other countries (Carter & Gruère, 2003; Jaeger, 2002; McCullum, 2000). The US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) does not require such labeling unless genetically modified products differ significantly from their traditional counterparts. Proposed FDA guidelines for voluntary labeling have not yet been finalized (Tegene, Huffman, Rousu, & Shogren, 2003). Some have suggested that voluntary labeling could increase industry credibility and consumer acceptance (Brown & Ping, 2003).

GE Labeling Issues in Oregon

Surveys have shown that consumers want genetically engineered food to be labeled (Brown & Ping, 2003;

Hoban & Kendall, 1993; Nestle, 1998). Consumers' desires to make informed decisions about food purchases have made the biotechnology food labeling issue an important public policy concern. Labeling genetically modified food presents major challenges for policymakers, however (Carter & Gruère, 2003). The state of Oregon has been in the forefront of this debate.

In November 2002, Oregonians voted on a ballot measure that would have required labeling of genetically engineered foods sold or distributed in or from Oregon (State of Oregon, 2002). Ballot Measure 27 required labels on all foods containing at least 0.1% of genetically modified ingredients. Any foods grown or distributed in Oregon for human or animal consumption were affected. The measure defined *genetically engineered* as "grown, manufactured, processed or otherwise produced or altered with techniques that change the molecular or cell biology of an organism by means or in a manner not possible under natural conditions or processes, including but not limited to recombinant DNA techniques, cell fusion, micro- and macro-encapsulation, gene deletion and doubling, introducing a foreign gene, and changing the positions of genes." Furthermore, the measure's definition of genetic engineering excluded "breeding, conjugation, fermentation, hybridization, in-vitro fertilization and tissue culture processes" (State of Oregon, 2002).

Proponents of the ballot measure (Citizens for Safe Food) argued for the consumers' right to know. They questioned whether safety to human health and the environment had been proven. Opponents (Coalition against Costly Labeling Law) raised concerns about potential costs (including the impact on farmers), as reflected in the media campaign.