

GMO and the “Natural” Food Fight: The Treacherous Terrain of Food Labeling

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Global Research, January 04, 2014

organicconsumers.org 31 December 2013

Region: [USA](#)

Theme: [Biotechnology and GMO](#)

2014 is shaping up to be a decisive year for the future of food and farming. Grassroots activists are gearing up for new legislative battles, including state GMO labeling laws and county bans on growing genetically engineered crops. Meanwhile the multinational food corporations last month raised the stakes in the ongoing David vs. Goliath battle [by petitioning](#) the U.S. Food & Drug Administration (FDA) to allow companies to continue to label or market products that contain genetically modified organisms (GMOs) as “natural.”

And all signs point to efforts by industry and the FDA to float either voluntary, or watered-down mandatory GMO labeling laws that would take away states’ rights to impose strict GMO labeling laws, and also exempt a large percentage of GMO ingredients from labeling.



For more than two decades, Monsanto and Big Food have poisoned and profited with impunity, thanks to the FDA’s reckless [1992 dictate](#) that pesticide-drenched (Roundup-resistant) or insecticide-impregnated (Bt-spliced) crops and foods are “safe and substantially equivalent” to non-GE foods. Now, the Biotech Bullies and Junk Food Giants are under siege by a well-informed and passionate grassroots food movement that is determined to drastically reduce or eliminate the market share of genetically engineered and chemically-intensive foods and crops.

Since natural health and food activists discovered the “Achilles Heel” of the GMA and processed junk food industries—mandatory labeling—there has been no stopping this movement. Over the past several years, this movement has painstakingly built a broad national coalition to demand laws requiring mandatory labeling of foods containing genetically engineered ingredients, the same types of laws that have been passed in the European Union and scores of other nations. Food activists, bolstered by a growing number of successful class action lawsuits, are also demanding that food manufacturers and retailers put an end to the routine industry practice of fraudulently labeling or marketing

products contaminated with GMOs and other chemicals as “natural” or “all natural.”

In the past two years, citizen activists in 30 states have pressured legislators to pass mandatory GMO labeling laws, with partial success in three states: Vermont, Connecticut and Maine. Anti-GMO campaigners boldly challenged the mega-billion-dollar biotech and Big Food establishment in 2012 in California (Proposition 37) and 2013 in Washington State (I-522) by launching state GMO labeling initiatives. Pro-organic and natural health activists raised a multi-million dollar war chest and mobilized millions of voters in two hard-fought and highly publicized campaigns that industry barely won (51%-49%). Both initiatives garnered national attention. Combined, they forced the biotech and food elite to spend \$70 million (\$12 million of which was [illegally laundered](#) in Washington state through their front group, the Grocery Manufacturers Association) and wage a blatantly dishonest campaign that ultimately divided the industry and [damaged the reputations](#) and sales of a number of national brands, including Coca-Cola (Honest Tea and Odwalla); Pepsico (Naked Juice); General Mills (Cascadian Farm and Muir Glen); Unilever (Ben & Jerry’s); Dean Foods (Horizon, Silk, White Wave); Heinz (Heinz Organic), Nestle’s, and Kellogg’s (Kashi, Morningstar Farms, Gardenburger).

Meanwhile, inspired in part by this anti-GMO grassroots upsurge, over 100 [class action lawsuits](#) have been filed across the U.S., charging major food corporations with labeling fraud for labeling or marketing GMO-tainted or chemically processed foods and cooking oils as “natural” or “all natural.” Rather than admit that much of their product lines are junk foods filled with synthetic chemicals and GMOs, and that nearly the entire \$70-billion “natural” products industry is based on fraud and deception (i.e. misleading health minded consumers into believing that unregulated, non-certified “natural” products are “nearly organic,”), large companies such as Pepsi, General Mills, Kellogg’s and Con-Agra, and specialty brands such as Chabani and Barbara’s will likely pay out millions of dollars in out-of-court settlements this year while quietly removing “natural” and “all natural” labels from their non-organic products.

GMO labeling laws are the cornerstone of the anti-GMO movement. But consumers are also expanding the fight by demanding outright bans on the growing of GMO crops. A number of counties in California, Washington and Hawaii have already passed bans, while a half dozen others, including counties in Oregon and California, will vote to create GMO-free zones in 2014.

Beyond “Exemptions:” Comprehensive Labeling

In a bizarre but effective propaganda move, polls reveal that Monsanto and the Grocery Manufacturers Association (GMA) bamboozled millions of voters into voting “no” on mandatory GMO food labeling initiatives in California and Washington by pretending to take the side of consumers. How? By pointing out that these ballot initiatives failed to require GMO labels on restaurant, cafeteria and take-out food, and on meat and animal products. During the California and Washington campaigns, industry hammered home its message that the proposed initiatives were “incomplete,” “confusing,” “expensive” and riddled with “loopholes” that somehow benefitted nefarious “special interests.” In fact, consumers would have preferred a more comprehensive law, with no exemptions. But state laws mandate single-subject or limited provision language, and federal law preempts mandatory state labels on meat packages (though not on grocery store shelves, or on meat and dairy cases).

In the wake of Monsanto and the GMA successfully sowing confusion over GMO labeling “exemptions,” a growing number of activists have decided to call industry’s bluff by upping the ante. Future plans include pushing not only for GMO food labeling laws, but for all-inclusive food labeling legislation that will require restaurants, schools and grocery stores to label not just foods that contain GMO ingredients, but also foods from factory farms where animals are fed GMO-contaminated feed.

As Alexis Baden-Meyer, Political Director of the Organic Consumers Association puts it:

“Tens of millions of Americans want to know if the food they buy contains genetically engineered ingredients. They want to know whether the meat, fish and animal products they consume come from animals reared on factory farms or CAFO’s (Confined Animal Feeding Operations), where the animals are inhumanely confined, routinely fed genetically engineered grain, injected with synthetic hormones, engorged with growth promoters and dosed with antibiotics. Concerned consumers want and need this information whether they are shopping in a grocery store, sitting down in a restaurant or worrying about what their kids are eating in the school cafeteria. After we win the upcoming strategic battles over GMO food labeling in Vermont and Oregon, organic consumers and our allies will push for comprehensive factory farm labels as well.”

Industry’s Next Move: Co-Opting the Right-to-Know Movement

Industry sees the writing on the wall. As the head of the GMA admitted last year “we can’t keep fighting these labeling battles in every state.” Monsanto, Bayer and their allies such as General Mills, Coca-Cola and Pepsi know that in 2014, several states including Vermont and Oregon will likely pass mandatory GMO food labeling laws, while a flood of successful class action lawsuits will highlight the fact that major brands are fraudulently labeling their GMO and chemically-tainted junk foods and beverages as “natural” or all natural.

Once a greater degree of labeling transparency is required by law, even if in just a handful of states, leading food manufacturers will find themselves in a terrible bind. Will Kellogg’s or Coke admit that their products contain GMOs in Vermont or Oregon, while refusing to divulge this fact in the other 48 states, Canada and Mexico? Or will they be forced to do what they’ve already done in the EU, take these GMOs out of their products? Similarly if they can’t label their junk foods as “natural” or “all natural,” how will they successfully compete in the marketplace?

Backed into a corner by the anti-GMO movement, industry has come out fighting. The GMA has [called on](#) the Obama Administration and the FDA to bail out Big Food. If grassroots-powered state laws and class action judges will no longer permit the biotech and food industry to secretly tamper with non-organic food and then fraudulently label these products as “natural,” then industry wants the federal government to take away states’ power to require GMO labeling, and at the same time, take away the judiciary’s power to rule on fraudulently labeled “natural” products.

Leaked documents [obtained](#) by the *New York Times* reveal that the GMA is lobbying the FDA to allow the use of “natural” on food labels even if the products contain GMOs. As Times writer Stephanie Strom reported on Dec. 19:

“Use of the term “natural” is now generating battles similar to previous fights over terms like organic, amid initiatives in several states that seek to label foods in a more

transparent way. Last summer, Connecticut passed legislation on labeling that would make it illegal to use the word “natural” on the packaging of any food product containing biotech ingredients, and the governor signed it on Dec. 11.”

At the same time former USDA officials Dan Glickman and Kathleen Merrigan are floating the idea that certain members of the organic elite might be persuaded to back off on the demand for strict GMO labeling if certified organic products are allowed to state on their labels that they are “GMO-free.” As Glickman and Merrigan [told](#) the *LA Times*:

“Mandatory GMO labeling of all food will continue to arouse passions on both sides of the issue. Though it may not satisfy all GMO-labeling advocates nor be welcomed by all leaders in the biotechnology industry, allowing a GMO-free organic label provides more choice in the marketplace and responds to the demands of millions of American consumers in a practical and common sense way.”

Meanwhile informed sources in the organic industry are warning that the FDA might be preparing to propose a watered-down federal GMO labeling law designed to co-opt the organic and anti-GMO Movement and take away states’ rights to pass stricter labeling laws covering all genetically engineered ingredients basically nullifying laws now under consideration in Vermont, Oregon and several dozen other states.

This strategy would involve the FDA allowing foods made from highly processed GE ingredients, such as cooking oils, high fructose corn syrup and sugar beets, that contain no easily detectable GE proteins down to a specified level to be labeled “natural”; and certified organic foods to be labeled as “GMO-free.” Under this strategy, labels would be required on only those foods that contain readily detectable GMO proteins, as determined by standardized tests. In other words a large percentage of GMO-tainted foods would still not have to be labeled.

So as we near victory on the GMO labeling front in Vermont and Oregon, and in class-action lawsuits this year, we must beware FDA treachery and the willingness of some in the organic and so-called “natural” industry to sell us out. If the FDA proposes a watered-down federal GMO labeling bill, or a rubber-stamp for the fraudulent industry practice of labeling GMO-tainted foods as “natural” or “all natural,” we must raise holy hell, and mobilize as never before.

Either way 2014 is shaping up to be a make or break year for citizen activism on the food and farming front, part of a larger battle that will determine whether we, the grassroots majority, take back our democracy, or surrender to the corporatocracy and their indentured media, scientists and politicians.

For related articles and more information, please visit OCA’s [Genetic Engineering page](#), and our [Millions Against Monsanto page](#).

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