

Food Label Logistics

Debate continues on how food should — and should not — be labeled.

Story by
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As consumers continue their quest to learn more about food, new attention is being turned to food labeling. A litany of news headlines were produced this fall related to the matter — scrutinizing everything from genetically modified ingredients, beta-agonists, finely textured beef and country-of-origin labeling. Here are highlights of the current status of labels for American foods.

Voters say no to GMO labeling

On Nov. 5, voters in Washington State rejected a ballot initiative that would have required labels on foods containing genetically engineered ingredients. Initiative 522 failed at the polls, with 54.8% of Washington voters against labeling GMO foods and 45.2% in favor. Had it passed, Washington would have been the first state in the nation to require labeling of genetically modified foods. A similar initiative failed in California last year.

The campaign against the initiative drew \$22 million in fundraising — mostly from the Grocery Manufacturers Association and agricultural

companies such as Dow AgroSciences and Bayer CropScience. Ads from food industry groups said that the initiative would have raised food prices.

Pro-GMO-labeling supporters have already announced plans to bring an initiative to a vote in Oregon in 2014. Labeling of food products that contain GMOs is popular in Europe, and Whole Foods Market has announced that by 2018, all products in its U.S. and Canadian stores must be labeled to indicate if they contain genetically modified organisms (GMOs). They have already begun a non-GMO labeling and verification process in stores and are the first national grocery chain in the United

States to set a deadline for full GMO transparency.

"We are putting a stake in the ground on GMO labeling to support the consumer's right to know," said Walter Robb, co-CEO of Whole Foods Market, when the announcement was made.

Pros and cons

However, Idaho Farm Bureau president Frank Priestley has spoken out against such GMO labeling. In an editorial published this fall, Priestley pointed out that the only crops in production that currently utilize genetic modification are corn, soybeans, sugar beets, alfalfa, papaya, canola, cotton and summer squash. Thus, he says, it's a moot point for Whole Foods to tout thousands of products in their stores as non-GMO-verified when carrots, potatoes, onions and many others don't use GMO seed to begin with.

Priestley says the issue of GMO labeling also becomes less clear with regard to livestock. He states, "When you consider that most of the main ingredients in livestock feed are corn, soybeans and alfalfa, and that significant percentages of these crops

currently in production are genetically modified, it becomes a much stickier issue for producers of meat, cheese, milk and other dairy products."

In his editorial, Priestley notes that GMO labeling would be nearly impossible to verify. He notes: "... No test exists that can tell the difference between sugar, corn, soy or any of the others that came from GMO seed being any different than commodities that came from conventional seed. In addition, if a cow, a

pig, sheep, etc., eats crops that come from GMO seed, there is no test in existence that can tell any difference in the meat, milk, etc., from that of any other animal."

Rather, Priestley suggests the focus of the GMO debate should focus on the science — that genetically altered crops have been in production in the United States for nearly 20 years, have been deemed safe through extensive testing by the federal government, and have shown zero adverse effects on the health of the general public. An article published by *Forbes Magazine* on Oct. 14, 2013, said much the same. It was titled: "2000+ Reasons Why GMOs Are Safe to Eat and Environmentally Sustainable."

On the other side of the labeling coin, Mark Lynas is a journalist and activist who once opposed GMO technology, but now believes GMO foods are safe and speaks out supporting their value in feeding the world. He says GMO products should be labeled, arguing that otherwise the industry will be perceived as hiding something from consumers.

In a speech last fall, Lynas said, "People are getting increasingly scared of GMOs precisely because the industry is fighting a battle not to tell people which foodstuffs contain them."

He continued, "Those of us who want to defend science and who understand the true potential of biotechnology have no option; we have to change the game. My challenge to



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the biotechnology industry — the whole food industry in general, in fact — is very clear. You have to stop opposing labeling. Instead, you have to embrace the consumer right to know."

Lynas proposes everything with a derivative of GMO ingredients involved in its production process — from beer to beef

— have an informational label attached to it. He also is adamant that such labeling should be industry-wide, which he says means it must be operated at the federal level, and it must be mandatory.

By offering such information, Lynas says consumers will be given the choice they are asking for, while also opening

the door to educate them more about the benefits of biotechnology. He says doing so could shift support away from the anti-GMO argument.

Two new meat labels

Consumers can look for more transparency from meat companies with the addition of two new labels.

One example is Cargill Inc., one of

the world's largest beef processors, who will begin labeling finely textured beef when it is used in the making of its U.S. ground-beef products, the company told *Reuters* Nov. 5.

Cargill said the new ground-beef packaging, slated to debut in early 2014, came about after the agribusiness firm surveyed more than 3,000 consumers during the previous 18 months about their views on ground beef and how it is made.

The survey arose after last year's intense media coverage of South Dakota-based Beef Products Inc. (BPI), which makes a similar product called "lean, finely textured beef," or LFTB.

Cargill's finely textured beef is a processed meat product made from chunks of beef, including trimmings, and exposed to citric acid to kill *E. coli* and other dangerous contaminants. The product, which Cargill has made since 1993, is used to produce higher-volume, less fatty ground beef. Cargill was able to escape some of the social-media furor over "pink slime" because it uses citric acid, which the public generally perceived at the time as more palatable than the ammonium hydroxide used by BPI.

"We've listened to the public, as well as our customers, and that is why we are declaring our commitment to labeling finely textured beef," said John Keating, president of Cargill Beef, in a statement.

Cargill's new packaging will state that a product "contains finely textured beef" on boxes of ground beef that retailers repackage for sale to the public, company officials said. By summer 2014, Cargill plans to have the same language printed on its branded packages of ground beef that are sold directly to consumers.

Some of BPI's customers, including Hy-Vee Inc., the Midwestern grocery retailer headquartered in Iowa, already disclose the product's use on their ground beef packages.

Also being added to the U.S. meat industry is the option to obtain a "never fed beta-agonists" marketing claim. The USDA's Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS) updated its Quality System Verification Program to include the new marketing claim in early November 2013.

"Beef and pork meat and meat products derived from animals that are certified to be labeled as never fed beta-agonists are eligible for customers that require verification that the meat is derived from animals that were never fed beta-agonists and is free of beta-agonist residues," AMS said in a Nov. 4 update.

Companies under federal inspection can obtain the new "never fed beta-agonists" claim through either a USDA Process Verified Program or Quality System Assessment by submitting a documented program that meets AMS guidelines under the claim and is audited and approved.

With a "never fed beta-agonists" claim now available, U.S. beef exporters are hopeful about regaining access to the lucrative Russian market, closed since February due to concerns stemming from the use of ractopamine.



On Nov. 23, 2013, USDA began enforcing the revised mandatory country-of-origin labeling (COOL) rule that was finalized in May. The rule requires that most muscle cuts of beef, pork and lamb sold through retail outlets carry a label detailing where various production activities for the cut took place. The labels specify where the animal from which the cut comes was born, raised and slaughtered. The label above designates that the animal was born, raised and harvested in the USA.

On Nov. 6, Russian officials announced they would lift the ban on U.S. beef in 2014, although no date has been provided. Reports suggest Russia will allow the United States to ship up to 60,000 tonnes of frozen muscle cuts under the import quota. Analysts say the United States is likely to readily accept the deal, because the quota is the same volume that was agreed to earlier for 2013.

Still to be determined in the beef industry is how the “never fed beta-agonists” marketing claim might play out in the domestic market. U.S. consumers have not overwhelmingly shown a concern over beta-agonists, according to survey data from Oklahoma State University.

COOL controversy

On Nov. 23, 2013, USDA began enforcing the revised mandatory country-of-origin labeling (COOL) rule that was finalized in May. The six months from May to November were considered an “education period” to allow packers and retailers to prepare for full implementation of the rule.

The rule requires that most muscle cuts of beef, pork and lamb sold through retail outlets carry a label detailing where various production activities for the cut took place. The labels specify where the animal from which the cut comes was born, raised and slaughtered. Essentially, the new rule requires one of three labels on U.S. muscle meat cuts:

- Born in Country X, Raised and Slaughtered in the U.S.
- Born and Raised in Country X, Slaughtered in the U.S.
- Born, Raised and Slaughtered in the US.

While many U.S. groups favor the labels, several opposed — including Canada and Mexico, who are challenging COOL before the World Trade Organization as a U.S. trade barrier.

Also notable, Tyson Foods Inc. announced in early November it would stop buying slaughter-ready Canadian cattle, claiming the extra procedures would be too costly under the COOL regulations. The decision ends exports of 3,000 head of cattle shipped to the United States for processing weekly.

Gerry Ritz, Canada's Agricultural Minister, says COOL regulations set in

place by the United States are costing his country more than \$1 billion annually, and he's ready to retaliate if changes aren't made.

Ritz addressed the North American Meat Association in Chicago in early November regarding COOL regulations and losses affecting his country's livestock producers. Ritz has suggested the quickest fix would be for the United States to make

amendments in the new Farm Bill to back off COOL regulations.

Ritz has said retaliatory measures, such as restricting imports of U.S. products, could be in play if COOL moves forward.

Editor's Note: Kindra Gordon is a freelancer and cattlewoman from Whitewood, S.D.