



To: Chairman Keenan, Chairman Sanchez and members of the Joint Committee on Public Health
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Testimony in favor of Labeling of Genetically Engineered Food

Good morning. My name is Alexander Scarlis and I am a Project Coordinator at the Massachusetts Public Interest Research Group (MASSPIRG). MASSPIRG is a member-supported, statewide, non-partisan and non-profit public interest advocacy organization in existence for at least 40 years. I am here today to communicate MASSPIRG's strong support of mandatory labeling of all genetically engineered (GE) food. Three bills before you today, H.1936, *An Act Relative to Genetically Engineered Food*, H.2037, *An Act to Establish Guidelines for Genetically Engineered Food*, and H.2093, *An Act Relative to the Labeling of Food*, filed by representatives DiNatale, Moran, and Story respectively, all call for GE food labeling. MASSPIRG strongly encourages the Committee to support the most comprehensive and forceful labeling provisions, including the language that just passed in the Vermont House of Representatives last month, to ensure that all GE food be labeled as such.

GE food labels directly support a fundamental consumer protection: the "right to know." A cornerstone of a healthy democracy and a functioning free market economy is the informed consumer. Armed with the information necessary to make purchases in line with their needs and values, informed consumers drive unwanted products out of the market and are shielded from harmful industry manipulation. At least 62 other countries including Australia, Japan and all 27 member nations of the European Union require labeling of GE food.^{1,2} It is time that we in Massachusetts do the same. Just last week Connecticut became the first state to pass a mandatory labeling law in its General Assembly and the Governor has indicated that he will sign it.³ One of the requirements of that law is that a state bordering Connecticut pass similar legislation. Let us join Connecticut in safeguarding the consumers' right to know what is in their food.

Background

Since their introduction into the food supply in the 1990s, GE ingredients have become increasingly hard to avoid. The Pew Charitable Trusts estimated in a 2005 report that 75% of processed food sold in the U.S. contains ingredients derived from GE crops such

¹ <http://tinyurl.com/bf67l5a>

² <http://tinyurl.com/dyd5mup>

³ <http://tinyurl.com/k4hmch4>

as corn, canola and soybeans.⁴ Ingredients like cornstarch, corn syrup, canola oil, and soybean oil are commonplace on food labels. Americans walking through their local grocery store would be hard-pressed to avoid such ingredients in typical purchases including cereals, soups, sauces, breads, salad dressings and snack foods.⁵

Given the abundance of GE ingredients in our food supply, it follows that, in the absence of labels, Americans seeking to avoid GE food have only one option: buy organic. Of course, limiting grocery store purchases to certified organic products is a luxury few of us can afford. As a result, most consumers are left with little to no choice. In fact, it is extremely likely that you and I have unknowingly ingested GE foods countless times and will continue to do so. Researchers are finding ways to genetically alter more types of food including tomatoes, potatoes and squash.⁶ Monsanto, one of the largest agricultural biotech companies, has also resumed research into GE wheat.⁷

Although most of us eat GE food, only a quarter of us say we understand what GE food really is, according to a 2010 Thomson Reuters poll for National Public Radio.⁸ According to that poll, only 21% of us think GE food is safe with the rest of us saying it is not safe or we are unsure. It makes sense then that 9 in 10 people surveyed in the poll said GE food should be labeled as such. People want labeling simply because they are not convinced of GE food's safety yet are essentially forced to eat it.

Safety

Despite the explosion of GE food, surprisingly little independent scientific research has been conducted in the U.S. to determine its safety. This is due in no small part to agricultural companies like Monsanto funding and controlling much of the research into GE seeds in this country. According to The Union of Concerned Scientists, these multibillion-dollar corporations often refuse to allow independent scientists access to seeds or they set severe restrictions on the research. For example, although Monsanto agreed to give the U.S. Department of Agriculture access to its seeds, their agreement does not cover research into crucial issues such as the health risks of GE crops.⁹

Such risks do exist. For example, it is possible through genetic engineering to transfer an allergen from a known allergenic food such as nuts into a non-allergenic food such as soybeans.¹⁰ According to the World Health Organization (WHO), it is also possible for antibiotic resistant genes used to make GE food to be transferred into the human body via consumption.¹¹ The WHO goes on to describe another concern: genes from GE crops used in products not approved for human consumption, e.g. animal feed, can find their way into crops used in human food through unintentional cross-contamination. It stands

⁴ <http://tinyurl.com/loujpk1>

⁵ <http://tinyurl.com/pr98v9j>

⁶ <http://tinyurl.com/63d7y5p>

⁷ <http://tinyurl.com/q8kme6w>

⁸ <http://tinyurl.com/83vswjp>

⁹ <http://tinyurl.com/kohd6xg>

¹⁰ <http://tinyurl.com/p69kg7d>

¹¹ <http://tinyurl.com/4q5ne>

to reason then that last year the American Medical Association called on the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) to conduct mandatory pre-market safety testing of GE foods after reviewing the relevant scientific literature between 2000 and 2012.¹²

Yet the FDA continues to refrain from independent safety testing of GE products. In fact, the FDA relies on industry data when making its assessments rather than conduct its own safety tests.¹³ Furthermore, the FDA only conducts such safety assessments if the GE seed producer chooses to participate in the FDA's voluntary consultation process, a policy on GE products not changed since 1992.¹⁴

A Compelling State Interest: Protect the “Right to Know”

Given the lack of sufficient independent scientific inquiry into GE products in the U.S., given a federal regulatory system with only voluntary safety assessments for GE products that depend on industry data, given the potential for adverse health outcomes related to GE food, and given the overwhelming consumer demand for labeling of GE food, the Commonwealth has a compelling state interest in mandating such labeling. To do otherwise is to deprive Massachusetts consumers of their fundamental “right to know” about the food they eat and purchase for their families.

I hope you will support these common sense labeling laws giving consumers the ultimate right of meaningful choice.

¹² <http://tinyurl.com/nlr18cg>

¹³ <http://tinyurl.com/m7kzot8>

¹⁴ <http://tinyurl.com/peuxuaj>