

# PRO/CON: Is it time to label GMO foods?

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Demonstrators rally in favor of labeling GMO food at the Capitol in Albany, New York, April 28, 2015. Photo: AP Photo/Tim Roske

## PRO: You won't have to worry about what's in your food

Health and food safety are scary subjects for millions of Americans — and rightly so.

Polls indicate alarm over the contamination of everyday foods. Americans are worried about pesticides, antibiotics, hormones and other unnatural things added to food.

Americans are especially concerned about genetically modified organisms (GMOs).

GMOs are plant or animal products that have been re-engineered in a lab. Scientists use the DNA of bacteria, viruses or other plants and animals. The purpose is to make seeds yield more crops or make the crops heartier. GMOs also make them more tolerant of herbicides that kill weeds, and resistant to insects and drought.

### Many Americans Want GMO Labels

A recent New York Times poll found that 93 percent of Americans want GMOs labeled. Already, 64 nations require such labels.

Two-thirds of Americans believe that GMOs are unsafe. Millions of consumers are switching over to non-GMO, organic foods. As a result, organics have moved from a niche market into a \$40 billion powerhouse.

Indeed, Americans now spend more than 10 cents of every food dollar for items labeled “organic,” “non-GMO” or “natural.”

Possible GMO labeling laws made it onto voting ballots in California, Washington and Oregon. The big food companies like Coca-Cola and chemical companies like Monsanto, the world’s largest manufacturer of genetically modified seeds, spent vast sums of money to sway voters. They were successful in stopping these labeling laws from passing.

Vermont, Maine and Connecticut have passed popular laws requiring the labeling of GMOs. In addition, eight counties in California, Washington, Oregon and Hawaii have banned GMO crops altogether.

Vermont’s GMO labeling law goes into effect in July 2016, already causing panic among major food brands. They know they’re in a predicament. One option they have is to remove all GMO ingredients from their products — which is what happened in the European Union after GMO food labeling became required in 1998. Otherwise, they can add a GMO label on the front of their packages and bottles.

## **Banned In Europe But Not In U.S.**

Eighty percent of supermarket foods now contain GMOs and the toxic chemicals sprayed on GMOs.

In March 2015, the International Agency for Research on Cancer of the United Nations World Health Organization (WHO) declared Monsanto’s Roundup glyphosate herbicide a “probable carcinogen.”

That prompted the banning of all GMO cultivation in several dozen nations, including much of Europe.

In the United States, the glyphosate herbicide currently is sprayed heavily on 84 percent of all GMO crops. Corn, soybeans, canola, sugar beets, cotton, wheat, beans and rice are all sprayed with it.

In California, authorities announced that Monsanto’s glyphosate would be added to its list of cancer-causing chemicals.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) previously acknowledged that long-term exposure to glyphosate can cause kidney and reproductive damage. And a report by a researcher at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology last year connected glyphosate to damage done to the human gut and digestive system.

Glyphosate use has also resulted in uncontrollable, herbicide-resistant superweeds on the majority of U.S. farmland. Meanwhile, the EPA, U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) have given the green light to a controversial new

generation of GMO crops. These crops are allowed to be sprayed with strong toxicides including 2,4-D — a component of Agent Orange. A herbicide, Agent Orange, was used to destroy crops and forests during the Vietnam War.

## **A Bad Bill In Congress**

Billions of pounds of glyphosate, atrazine, 2,4-D and other toxic pesticides are now being sprayed on our food to prevent pests from ruining crops. In addition, billions of pounds of highly polluting chemical fertilizers are added to help crops grow.

This GMO chemical onslaught is destroying our health and contaminating our soil, water and air.

Americans want GMO labeling. Unfortunately, Monsanto, other big food companies and the members of Congress who receive political donations from them have decided that you, the consumer, have no right to know what's in your food.

In July, the U.S. House of Representatives passed a highly unpopular bill, the Safe and Accurate Food Labeling Act of 2015. It would take away states' and consumers' rights to require labels on GMO foods.

The bill also makes it legal to fraudulently label GMO and chemical tainted foods as "natural." Now this bill, dubbed the DARK (Deny Americans the Right to Know) Act, goes to the Senate.

Americans can help stop passage of the DARK Act. Tell the House and Senate you want mandatory labels on GMOs.

*ABOUT THE WRITER: A leading global food activist, Ronnie Cummins is executive director of Organic Consumers Association, a nonprofit U.S.-based network of 850,000 consumers, and the author of "Genetically Engineered Foods: A Self-Defense Guide for Consumers." Readers may write him at OCA, 6771 South Silver Hill Drive, Finland, MN 55603*

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## **CON: No need to worry, GMOs are safe**

It's been estimated that 70 to 80 percent of foods eaten in the United States contain ingredients that have been genetically modified. They are called genetically modified organisms (GMOs).

But labeling these foods is certainly not a food safety issue. There has never been a case of harm to people from GMO products — ever. And it's also not something that the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) can legally do right now. It can't because there is no scientific difference between GMO foods and regular foods.

By the year 2025, the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) estimates that two-thirds of the world's population will confront a water shortage. Ecosystems will also suffer.

One way to make this scenario less dangerous to our food supply is to use GMO foods. They reduce the need for plowing fields. This allows the soil to stay moist and helps plants retain water.

In some cases, this will make the difference between a harvest or crop failure. Some results show crop yields increasing by 4 to 8 percent in dry weather. Other results suggest gains as much as 21 percent.

With nearly 1 person in every 9 not having enough to eat on this planet, that's a promising start.

## **Pesticides No Cause For Fear**

Another way that GMO foods help us is that they use less pesticide. One study found that it reduced the quantity of pesticides by 37 percent and the cost by 39 percent. Although pesticides get a bad rap, the truth is that the trace amounts of pesticides that you find in the average diet are totally safe.

As one toxicologist put it, there are more carcinogens in a single cup of coffee than there are in all of the pesticide residue you consume in a year. That doesn't mean that coffee will give you cancer. All it means is that human exposure to pesticides is extremely low.

An increase in yield and a decrease in pesticide costs will lower the price of food. That's a good thing, particularly if you're not well off.

It's amazing that, after 20 years of GMO crops, there is still a debate about them. In fact, the manipulation of food genes is nothing new. It's just a newer version of natural plant breeding that began between 8,000 and 10,000 years ago. Back then, farmers bred plants by choosing the best ones to retain for planting in the following year.

The corn we eat today, for example, is the result of genetically modified plantings from thousands of years ago. Within the last few hundred years, farmers began artificially mating or cross-pollinating plants to increase yields. GMO foods are a scientific extension of this process. Modern technology just allows the process to be done to greater effect and to tackle specific problems.

## **Labels Would Discourage Innovation**

Thanks to technology, we can produce crops that keep better and are easier to process. These crops produce foods that spoil less from mold, have fewer allergens and, ultimately, grow medicines in them.

We have already seen that with Golden Rice, a GMO food that contains beta carotene (Vitamin A) which helps to reduce blindness. It even prevents up to 2 million deaths annually in poor countries.

Labeling GMO products would be expensive. It could also discourage innovation in this necessary technology.

While labels may seem like a good way to share information, the costs on manufacturers will force them to raise food prices. Many people simply cannot afford that.

For those who wish to buy non-GMO foods, there is the option to buy organic. However, it's important to keep in mind that if you buy organic, you are actually putting yourself more at risk.

Organic foods are four to eight times more likely to be recalled for microbial contamination. And for that, you are paying a lot more.

*ABOUT THE WRITER: Richard Williams is vice president for policy research and director of the Regulatory Studies Program at George Mason University's Mercatus Center. A former director for social sciences at the Center for Food Safety and Applied Nutrition in the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA), he holds a PhD in economics from Virginia Tech University. Readers may write him at Mercatus Center at GMU, 3434 Washington Blvd, 4th Floor, Arlington, VA 22201*

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