

WE HAVE THE RIGHT TO KNOW ABOUT OUR FOOD

May 2013

A wide variety of genetically engineered (GE) foods, also known as genetically modified (GM) foods, have entered the United States food system in enormous amounts. But in sharp contrast to 64 other nations that require labeling of GE foods, consumers here are in the dark and have no way of knowing whether the products they eat and feed their families are genetically engineered.

That is why **Just Label It** was formed. JLI is a national coalition of more than 650 organizations and 300,000 members dedicated to bringing about mandatory labeling of genetically engineered foods. The **Just Label It** message is simple: We consumers have a right to know what's in our food so we can make informed choices about what we buy, eat and feed our families.

THE TRUTH BEHIND GE FOODS

GE foods are patented inventions created primarily by six chemical companies (Monsanto, Dow, BASF, Bayer, Syngenta and DuPont). Most GE crops were designed to make it easier to spray herbicides on growing crops, killing weeds but leaving the genetically transformed crops unharmed. Growing these crops has resulted in substantial increases in the use of herbicides and insecticides, frequently in amounts that have never been tested for safety in humans, animals or other plants.

Overall pesticide use on the three major GE crops grown in the U.S. – corn, soybeans and cotton – increased by more than 527 million pounds from 1996 to 2011.¹ Most of the increase resulted from growing reliance on the herbicide glyphosate, the key ingredient in Monsanto's Roundup, the world's best selling weed killer. The U.S. Geological Survey has found that glyphosate is now a common component of the air and rain in the Midwest during spring and summer, and levels are rising in many aquatic ecosystems.

In the arms race between growers and weeds, moreover, the weeds have fought back, and 21 types have evolved to become resistant to glyphosate. Called "superweeds," they are emerging at an alarming rate and now flourish on more than 14 million acres where GE soy, corn and cotton crops grow. Several chemical companies are responding to this phenomenon by trying to design new GE seeds that tolerate stronger herbicides.

LACK OF GOVERNMENT OVERSIGHT

The European Union, Japan, Russia and China are among the 64 nations worldwide that require GE foods to be labeled. The European Union has also banned cultivation of GE crops altogether, with only minor exceptions.

In contrast, the United States has a "fast track" approval process for new GE food products. What's more, the government does not use its own experts to make the key determination of whether a GE

food is safe. Instead, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) relies on the biotechnology companies to affirm that each new GE food they create is “not materially different in any respect relevant to food safety.” The FDA accepts this assurance and informs the company that it has a “...continuing responsibility...” to ensure that the GE food is safe, wholesome and in full compliance with regulatory requirements.

Not surprisingly, GE crops have entered the U.S. food supply at an increasingly rapid pace over the last 16 years. And at the moment, industry has petitions pending for federal approval to market three new genetically engineered foods. They would extend GE foods into new sectors of the food supply while raising a host of novel concerns over human health and the environment. Currently awaiting approval are:

- **Genetically Engineered Fish** – salmon engineered to produce growth hormones year-round rather than seasonally, causing the fish to grow at twice the normal rate but reducing their levels of health promoting, long-chain omega-3 fatty acids.
- **Genetically Engineered Fruit** – apples genetically engineered to stop producing the enzyme that leads to browning. No one knows what altered genes might do to nutrition quality or safety.
- **Genetically Engineered “2,4-D” Crops** – to combat weeds that have developed resistance to Roundup (glyphosate), Dow is seeking approval of GE crops that are resistant to an older, high-risk herbicide. Many university weed scientists are speaking out against the dangerous notion that the best way to combat resistant weeds is to spray still more herbicide. In the U.S., there are already eight important weeds that are resistant to 2,4-D.

Like the GE crops already in the food supply, these newly invented foods have not been subjected to independent safety testing, to clinical trials for possible effects on human health, to long-term tests for carcinogenicity or to testing for effects on fetal or child development.

The chemical industry, meanwhile, has spent more than half a billion dollars (\$572 million) in campaign contributions and lobbying expenditures over the last decade to advance its interests.² One of industry’s primary goals is to prevent mandatory labeling of GE foods.

AMERICANS WANT LABELING OF GE FOODS

Studies show that an overwhelming majority of Americans support labeling GE foods – more than nine out of ten voters across all demographics of party affiliation, gender, age and socioeconomic status. Yet, for 20 years they have been denied that right. Our reasons for wanting to know about our food may vary, but what unifies us is the belief that this is our right. Without labeling, we cannot make informed choices about the foods we eat and feed our families. JLI is committed to fight for this right.

Launched in the fall of 2011, JLI’s coalition includes more than 650 partner organizations representing the health care community, consumer advocates, farmers, concerned parents, environmentalists, food and farming organizations, businesses, the faith-based community and many others concerned

with protecting the consumer's right to know.

The mounting support for the right to know has led to JLI's unprecedented success. It took only 180 days to generate more than 1.2 million comments on the FDA's GE labeling petition, more than on any other food petition in the agency's history.

While the pros and cons of GE foods continue to be debated, Americans are being kept in the dark while they unknowingly eat GE foods daily. Washington can no longer ignore the voices of millions who want choice and peace of mind about their food. It is time for the FDA to update its policies to the 21st Century and mandate federal GE food labeling. JLI will continue to keep the pressure on until we win the right to know about our food.

To sign the petition and learn more about the right to know, visit JLI on the web at www.justlabelit.org

ENDNOTES

1. ("The Impact of Genetically Engineered Crops on Pesticide Use in the U.S., the First Sixteen Years", Charles Benbrook, PhD, June 14-15, 2012) <http://www.enveurope.com/content/24/1/24>

2. Food & Water Watch, Issue Brief, November 2010 <http://www.foodandwaterwatch.org/briefs/food-and-agriculture-biotechnology-industry-influence/>