

OPINION | COMMENTARY

Stand Up for GMO Foods by Labeling Them

A sticker on genetically modified groceries may debunk irrational fears.

By **RICHARD SEXTON** and **STEVEN SEXTON**

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With the recent release of another exhaustive report by the National Academies of Sciences attesting to the safety of genetically modified organisms, or GMOs, it is time for the food industry and advocates of genetically engineered crops to stand up for their products and put a label on them.

This could be the best way to make consumers confront their irrational fears, to stamp out public ignorance and to save an important technology that is too easily demonized by companies—like Whole Foods and Chipotle—that exploit consumer ignorance to seek competitive advantage in the marketplace.

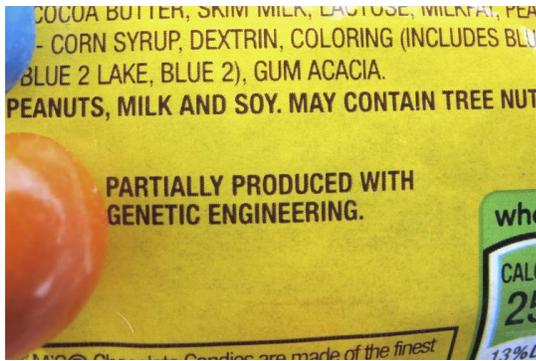


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Despite the scientific evidence, polls continue to show that most Americans fear that GMOs may harm their health. A 2015 report by the Pew Research Center, for instance, found that 57% of American adults think GMOs are generally unsafe whereas 88% of scientists think they are generally safe.

Statistics like these scare farmers and food

manufacturers who have opposed mandatory GMO labeling laws like the one soon to be implemented in Vermont. Some have even pre-emptively pulled products from grocery shelves or replaced GMO ingredients.

But food producers may be more worried than they need to be. Studies that indicate popular aversion to GMOs do so in highly stylized experimental settings that highlight GMO attributes and do not resemble typical grocery shopping experiences. They reveal consumers to be poorly informed about the foods they eat and to have inconsistent preferences that vary depending upon how studies are conducted.

For instance, 90% of Americans want GMOs labeled if that question is posed to them, according to a 2013 survey by Rutgers University. But when researchers ask them to list the food characteristics they want labeled, only 7% name GMOs. And a 2015 survey by Oklahoma State University found that 80% of respondents would require labels on foods containing DNA—even though all foods contain DNA.

What better way to dispel the myths and fears about GMOs than to label the 70%-80% of packaged foods that, according to the Grocery Manufacturers Association, contain them? These include soups, milk, cereals, sodas, frozen foods, baby food, fruit juice and soy milk. If these are all labeled, consumers will realize they have been eating GMOs for years without adverse effect, and they will soon be immune to the demagoguery of food Luddites.

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This education of the American consumer—and indeed consumers around the world—would not only be welcomed by farmers and food producers, it also would aid the poor, hungry and malnourished for whom advanced seed technology offers hope for a better future.

The oldest and most widely adopted genetically engineered seeds reduce crop damage, boosting yields and profits particularly in developing countries. Newer genetically modified seeds increase nutrients in staple foods of the poor and help overcome soil and climate problems that have precluded poor regions from producing cash crops.

As the new National Academies report concluded, GMOs are safe for the environment, and can limit the environmental impact of a food production system that must grow 70%-100% more food by 2050 in order to feed a world population gaining in size and wealth.

Labels on GMOs might also compel some food companies to defend their ingredients and production practices against claims made by organic foods competitors. Not only have scientists demonstrated the virtues of GMOs, they have also highlighted the hype about organic foods for which consumers are, in their ignorance, willing to pay substantial premiums. Organic foods offer no demonstrable health benefits, and while they may deliver some environmental benefits, they also impose environmental costs.

Consider, for instance, that while GMOs can boost crop yields by 30%, yields for organic crops are substantially lower—about 25% lower than conventional crops on average, according to reports in *Nature* in 2012 and *Environment and Development Economics* in 2014. Organic production consumes more cropland and water. GMOs save land by reducing crop losses from pest damage.

Since developing countries import GMO policies from the developed world and rely on industrialized markets to buy their crops, the food and policy choices made in America and Europe can harm poor countries.

So it's up to Western consumers. Once they understand that their own experiences with GMO foods demonstrate the technology's safety, they will choose science over fear mongering, and the health and welfare of poor populations over elitist conceit.

Richard Sexton is chairman of the Department of Agricultural and Resource Economics at the University of California, Davis. Steven Sexton, his son, is assistant professor of public policy and economics at Duke University's Sanford School of Public Policy.



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