GE labeling

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Consumer product labeling of food derived from modern biotechnology is an important topic of interest to regulators, policy makers and consumers. Among other considerations, one should reflect on the intended purpose for food labeling. Some food labeling is mandated to communicate food safety concerns (for example, presence of allergen), while other food labeling is a response to the consumer's "right to know."

Countries around the world have adopted a variety of approaches to the labeling of food derived from modern biotechnology. Many major producers of genetically engineered (GE) crops, such as the United States, Canada and Argentina have voluntary labeling regimes. In the United States, the 1992 Food and Drug Administration (FDA) policy statement explains that the US applys the same approach to labeling of conventional food. Specifically, labeling criteria is dependent on the characteristic and intended use of the food and NOT on the production method. Labels must be truthful and not misleading. Applying the US FDA approach, several conditions requires mandatory labeling for all foods. These conditions are instances where there is (1) a health or safety consideration (for example presence of allergen), (2) a significant difference in composition or nutritional content or (3) special need for storage, preparation, etc. In these instances of mandatory labeling, the material difference is required to be noted on the label; the process by which the food is derived is not required to be included in the label.

Mandatory approaches to the labeling of food derived from modern biotechnology vary in the scope and trigger. Some considerations for deliberation when designing a mandatory labeling regime are:

(1) What will be labeled –some systems limit the scope of the labeling requirement to a subset of foods, for example soy and corn.

(2) What will be exempted – some systems, such in the European Union, exempt food derived from animals fed with GE feed, and food which may use GE processing aides (enzymes), for example cheese, yogurt, beer.

(3) What will trigger labeling requirement – different systems have varying levels of thresholds above which the food must be labeled; some systems base the labeling on presence of the transgene, others on the presence of the foreign protein, and others simply on the method of production regardless of whether the transgene or protein is present in the final product.

There is cost to the producer to comply with and cost to the government to enforce mandatory labeling regimes. Such costs can include added costs for supply chain segregation, testing, documentation, protection against liability for accidental comingling and noncompliance.

International organizations have refrained from endorsing any specific labeling approaches. After 20 years of negotiations, in 2011 the CODEX Committee on Food Labeling adopted a "Compilation of Codex Texts Relevant to Labelling of Foods Derived from Modern Biotechnology." This document promotes the use of existing Codex texts that apply to all foods, does not endorse any existing labeling approaches and clarifies that foods derived from modern biotechnology are not necessarily different from other foods simply due to the method of production.