



# THE RIGHT TO KNOW

GMO labeling is creating a new generation of food activists

BY FRAN MCMANUS □ ILLUSTRATION BY VIRGINIA PERRY-UNGER

**O**n a sultry evening in mid-July, I joined a group of South Jersey residents in the community room of the Collingswood Library to engage in some old-fashioned grassroots activism. Having navigated through the oppressive heat and a car rally that shut down the town's main drag, we gathered at this monthly meeting of GMO Free NJ to write letters to state officials demanding action on a highly contentious issue—the mandatory labeling of genetically engineered foods.

GMO Free NJ got its start in April 2012 when Barbara Thomas and Kathleen McKenna set up an information table at the Collingswood Green Festival. Alarmed by stories they'd read about genetically engineered foods, the two home-schooling moms talked with festivalgoers about the prevalence and potential risks of genetically modified organisms (GMOs) in the food supply. A follow-up meeting drew about a dozen people, Thomas recalls, "and it just took off from there." Now attendance at their monthly meetings averages about 50 and they have over 1,100 contacts on their email list and Facebook group.

The format of GMO Free NJ meetings varies to include films, panel discussions, guest speakers and letter writing, as well as seed swaps, cookie exchanges and potlucks. Practicing what they call "optimistic activism," McKenna and Thomas try to interject levity into even the most serious discussions. "It has definitely been the funnest activism I've been involved in," says McKenna, who grew up in an activist household. "There are always kids and laughing and music and art. I think it keeps people coming back."

McKenna and Thomas use their Facebook group and monthly meetings to update members on legislation and research and to facilitate discussion and encourage action. "Our job has been to empower everyone we meet to develop a relationship with their legislators," McKenna says. "And to make informed choices at the supermarket and at restaurants. It's not just armchair activism." One area in which GMO Free NJ is very active is an effort to pass a labeling law in New Jersey.

## The Controversy Over Labeling

State and national efforts to require the labeling of genetically engineered foods have met with fierce—and well-funded—opposition from the biotech industry, food processors, farming groups and the

grocery industry. Despite that opposition, more than 20 states, including New Jersey, currently have GMO labeling bills or ballot initiatives under consideration. In June 2013, Connecticut became the first state in the nation to pass a labeling law, but with strings attached. For the law to take effect, labeling bills must be passed in four other states, one of which must border Connecticut. Bills must also be passed by any combination of Northeastern states that together have a combined population of at least 20 million people.

The argument against labeling centers on the Food and Drug Administration's determination that foods developed through genetic engineering do not differ from those produced through conventional breeding. Because of that determination, there is no requirement for safety testing to determine the long-term impact of GMOs on human health. That determination also supports the Grocery Manufacturers Association's argument that "special mandatory labeling could mislead consumers into believing that foods produced through modern biotechnology are somehow different or present a special risk or a potential risk."

Supporters of labeling contend that GMOs are different from traditionally bred crops, that they pose unique risks, and that each crop should be required to undergo independent, peer-reviewed safety testing before approval. Labeling, they argue, will facilitate identification and tracking of unintended health effects from genetically engineered foods once they enter the food supply—such as the inadvertent introduction of new allergens or increased levels of naturally occurring allergens or toxins.

The Center for Food Safety states their concerns more bluntly. In a legal petition to the FDA to require labeling of genetically engineered foods, the D.C.-based organization writes that "genetic engineering makes silent but fundamental changes to our food at the molecular and cellular level, the full human health and environmental consequences of which are still being discovered" and accuses the FDA of "using 19<sup>th</sup> century ideas to regulate 21<sup>st</sup> century foods."

In response to growing demands for labeling, BASF, Bayer CropScience, Dow AgroSciences, DuPont, Monsanto, and Syngenta formed the Council for Biotechnology Information, which launched a website to address consumer questions and concerns about genetically engineered foods. In response to a question about the absence of long-term human-health studies posted on that website by Theresa

Lam, a board member of the Northeast Organic Farming Association of New Jersey, Peter Davies, a professor of plant physiology at Cornell University, answered:

GMO foods have been eaten over 16 years by billions of humans and livestock with no problems. No long term individual study can equal this experience. Long term animal studies have indeed been done. Such studies are very difficult to do with regard to controlling for all variability; e.g., rats can get sick from too many tomatoes. Long-term studies are also very expensive. As we know the genes involved, and there is no cause to think that either the DNA or protein is any different from those contained in other plants of the same species, there is no reason, given our experience and cost, to start such studies.

### The New Jersey Labeling Bill

For New Jersey State Senator Robert Singer, it comes down to the right to know what is in the food we buy. In February 2012, Singer, along with Senator Joseph Vitale, introduced a bill (S1367) to require the labeling of all foods offered for sale in New Jersey that contain genetically modified material. An Assembly version (A3192) of that bill was introduced in July 2012 by Assemblywoman Linda Stender.

### Retailers Take Labeling Into Their Own Hands

Some retailers aren't waiting to see the outcome of labeling efforts. Whole Foods Market has pledged that by 2018 all products in its U.S. and Canadian stores "must be labeled to indicate if they contain genetically modified organisms (GMOs)." The company is also putting all of their 365 Everyday Value line through Non-GMO Project verification. Trader Joe's website states that the company does not allow GMOs in its private-label products. New Jersey-based Dean's Natural Foods Markets has pledged to stop buying any products containing high-risk ingredients (corn, soy, canola, alfalfa and sugar beets) that don't carry the organic or Non-GMO Verified label. And, in March 2013, Chipotle became the first U.S. restaurant chain to label genetically modified foods on their online menu.



The stated purpose in both bills is "to enable consumers in the State to make knowledgeable decisions about food consumption."

Right-to-know came up often at the July GMO Free NJ meeting as Thomas's status report on labeling efforts gave way to a freewheeling conversation about health concerns and fears. Some attendees spoke in general terms about the rise in food allergies and autism over the past two decades—speculating that there might be a linkage to GMOs. Other attendees voiced more personal concerns.

Ellen spoke about her grandchildren—one with crippling asthma, another with severe allergies. She wants labeling so that her family can determine whether the children's symptoms improve when genetically engineered foods are removed from their diets. Keith, who has multiple food allergies, concurred. "I'm a big label reader and many things end up back on the shelf until I contact the company because there are a lot of hidden things out there. That's why I would like to have GMOs labeled."

Attendees also voiced anger over the absence of labeling in the U.S., given that over 60 countries—including China, India, Russia, Australia, and members of the European Union—have mandatory labeling of some or all genetically engineered ingredients. "We have manufacturers all across the United States who are shipping food to Europe that fulfills all of those labeling requirements," Thomas says. "Why can't they do that for us?"

### The Fall Push

GMO Free NJ is part of a coalition of Jersey organizations—including Food & Water Watch, NOFA-NJ, and the Sierra Club—that are coordinating statewide efforts on labeling. The coalition anticipates significant action on the labeling bills between November and the end of the year. "We need this bill to move through the Assembly and the Senate," says Jim Walsh, eastern-region director for Food & Water Watch. "But the fate of the labeling of genetically engineered foods really lies with Governor Christie. When the bill gets to his desk, he's the one who is going to decide to sign it or veto it."

While the labeling bills have bipartisan support, many industry groups oppose them, including the New Jersey Retail Merchants Association, New Jersey Food Council, New Jersey Farm Bureau, New Jersey Restaurant Association, BioNJ, Chemistry Council of New Jersey and the New Jersey Food Processors Association. A resolution opposing mandatory labeling was also adopted by delegates to the State Agricultural Convention in Atlantic City in February 2013.

Singer says he has been getting pushback from industry groups. Some concerns, he noted in a phone interview, are legitimate, such as logistical issues raised by restaurants and the liquor industry. (He now favors exempting them from labeling.) And he is sympathetic to retailers who argue that a national law would remove the difficulty of complying with a patchwork of different state requirements. However, he is also aware that calls to forgo state action in favor of a national law might be a stalling tactic, noting "they know that to get something done on Capitol Hill takes forever." ▶

## The National Picture

GMO Free NJ is a founding member of Citizens for GMO Labeling, which provides support for state labeling efforts and tries to create consistency among state labeling bills. It is important to the coalition that states adopt the EU threshold that requires labeling of foods with a GMO content of more than 0.9%. Products with a GMO content of 0.9% or below are exempt from labeling.

Coalition members want to see that threshold included in the Genetically Engineered Food Right-to-Know Act—national labeling legislation introduced in April 2013 by Senator Barbara Boxer of California and Representative Peter DeFazio of Oregon. If the Right-to-Know Act leaves it up to the FDA to decide the threshold, the coalition worries that the number will be set so high that it renders labeling ineffective and misleading.

## A New Generation of Activists

One thing that was clear at the July meeting—GMO Free NJ is a welcome haven for people who feel isolated and angered by this issue. Nicole, a young woman who first encountered GMO Free NJ at a rally in Philadelphia, echoes sentiments expressed by many attendees. “I didn’t know that people were getting together to talk about this. Doing this has been a life changer because now I am throwing stuff out of my cabinets and buying organic and reading labels.”

McKenna and Thomas are especially proud that GMO Free NJ attracts people from across the political spectrum—many of whom have never been politically active. “Even the non-activists will come out and attend rallies,” Thomas says. “Some people had never even voted and now they are making appointments to meet with their legislators. I think that’s really a testament to what this issue means to all of us.”



## Avoiding GMOs

From soft drinks to breakfast cereal, GMO ingredients are part of most of the processed foods found in the grocery store. Here are some ways to avoid them:

- **Buy organic** – The use of genetically modified seed or animal feed is not allowed in certified-organic products. In products labeled “Made with Organic Ingredients” the nonorganic ingredients cannot be genetically modified.
- **Look for the Non-GMO Project Verified seal** – This label is found on over 10,000 products that comply with standards set by the Non-GMO Project—a nonprofit organization providing third-party certification that products are free of GMOs. The Non-GMO Project Standard contains strict requirements for GMO testing, segregation and traceability. The label has also been approved by the USDA for use on meat and liquid egg products produced from animals that were not fed genetically engineered feed.
- **Avoid nonorganic high-risk crops and the ingredients derived from them** – Genetically engineered food and feed crops currently in commercial production include alfalfa, canola, corn, cotton, papaya, soybeans, sugar beets, sweet corn, zucchini and yellow summer squash. Many common ingredients in processed foods—including aspartame, canola oil, corn oil, corn syrup, cottonseed oil, dextrose, isoflavones, MSG, soy flour, soy lecithin, soybean oil, and sugar (unless labeled “pure cane sugar”)—may be made from GMOs. See an expanded list at [nonGMOshoppingguide.com](http://nonGMOshoppingguide.com).

## GE and GMOs

In their online glossary, Monsanto defines genetically modified organisms (GMOs) as “plants or animals that have had their genetic makeup altered to exhibit traits that are not naturally theirs. In general, genes are taken (copied) from one organism that shows a desired trait and transferred into the genetic code of another organism.” Genetic engineering (GE) is the process of removing, modifying or adding genes from viruses, bacteria, plants or animals to living organisms to create GMOs.

