Debate and Policies on Labeling GM Foods

**Pros and Cons of Labeling**

There are a lot of different views on this topic and therefore there is a lot of debate.  Below, the major points on both sides of the debate are outlined.  There will also be a section discussing some surveys that have been taken in different countries.

Pros

The biggest pro cited by advocates is that labeling gives consumers a choice in what they are eating (Biotechnology Issues, 2001).  Another argument is that labeling would deter “further market and trade disruptions” (Biotechnology Issues, 2001).  Those pro labeling cite the lack of willingness to clearly label GM foods  as meaning that GM producers have something to hide and the industry does not support consumers making an informed decision (Hunter, 2000).  Advocacy groups and individuals alike want the US and Canada to mandate private firms to label products containing GM ingredients and content, no matter the cost. Mandatory labeling may not be possible, but some other way is needed to give consumers the info they want (Smyth and Phillips, 2003).  In order to ensure all GM food is being properly labeled, some groups, like Friends of the Earth, want the governments to levy tax on GM producers so they are the ones who pay for the monitoring, and not the consumers. (Houlder, 1999).

Cons

U.S., Canada, Argentina, and Egypt have taken the first step in filing a formal dispute with the World Trade Organization against the EU moratorium on new approvals.  They argue the moratorium is a barrier to trade and does not adhere to the Sanitary and Phytosanitary Agreement of the WTO.  The also dislike the fact there is not a clear timetable for addressing the lack of scientific evidence against GMO.  The Labeling Committee of the Codex Alimentarius has been meeting since 1994 to work out international standards for the labeling of GM foods (Smyth and Phillips, 2003).  Recently, it seems as though the EU is taking steps to lift the ban, so maybe the dispute will fizzle out.

Some of the proposals offered by those who want mandatory labeling will waste money, unnecessarily alarm consumers, and delay advances in biotechnology.  Also, the availability of detection methods is limited and there is the potential for discrimination against producers or GM-friendly countries.  What people don’t often realize is that the consequences of imposing labels can be expensive (Reiss, 2002).  In the U.K. and EU, there are funding shortages that make monitoring difficult (Houlder, 1999).  EU proposals for labeling are not enforceable without cash (Anonymous, 2003).  Also, small businesses are not aware of all the rules of labeling GM foods. In addition, GM-free means different things in GM free means different things in different parts of the EU, which could potentially cause trade problems (Houlder, 1999).

One alternative offered is to allow restaurants and companies to label voluntarily.  Consumers who really want GM free foods will choose to buy or eat at those establishments and incur the cost.  Most consumers, however, will not put forth the effort to do this (Reiss, 2002).  Mandatory labels are not economically or physically feasible, nor are many voluntary labeling proposals. Labeling could deter consumers from buying GM foods and then they would disappear off the market.  There are not many “economic incentives for firms to provide GM labeling information.” If labeling is considered a good political move, governments will force the labeling of GM foods and the cost will be passed to consumers (Smyth and Phillips, 2003).  Voluntarily or mandatory, labeling would cause a segregated market.  Segregated markets would not be good in the long run because they would cause a rift in the supply and demand curve and the overall effect would be less quantity and higher prices in both markets (Biotechnology Issues, 2001).  The U.S., the EU, and other regions of the world already ensure that the GM foods on the shelf are safe and therefore mandatory labeling is not required. (Reiss, 2002).

Surveys

Multitudes of surveys have shown Americans to be in favor of GM labeling (Genetic Engineering Network, 2003). While 94% of Americans want labeling, the numbers on mandatory labeling or the avoidance of labeled foods varies from survey to survey (Hallman, Hebden, Aquino, Cuite, and Lang, 2003; Genetic Engineering Network, 2003).  Although an overwhelming majority of Americans want labeling on GM foods, before GM foods were mentioned, less than 1% mentioned GM ingredients as something they would want to see on food labels (Hallman, Hebden, Aquino, Cuite, and Lang, 2003).  This brings up an interesting point: Do Americans really know what GM foods are?  A survey among Americans shows terms like GM, non-GM, and GM–free do not provide sufficient information to consumers, and many Americans do not understand those terms. Surveys in Canada, Japan, Norway, the U.S. and the U.K. showed that consumers want GM foods to be labeled, but an experimental test in North America showed that GM labels did not have a significant impact on consumer purchasing.  One study did show that in the U.S. voluntary labeling would be more effective (Smyth and Phillips, 2003).  In general, Americans want the labels, would be willing to incur the cost, and want access to detailed information on GM foods.  Most think it is okay for Japan and the EU to mandate GM labeling even if consumers will not buy U.S. foods since the long term effects are not known and consumers have a right to choose.  “A majority says that it would avoid eating genetically modified food, but this resistance is not deep-seated, as a majority also says that it would probably buy such food if it was cheaper, tasted better, or was less apt to require the use of pesticides” (Program on International Policy Attitudes).

It is not the same in all countries.  In a study in Norway, large discounts had to be offered to buyers before they would purchase GM bread or salmon.  While Americans are at least aware of the GM controversy, consumers in Colombia and Italy are not very aware of GM food products (Smyth and Phillips, 2003).

One must be leery of any surveys presented on either the pro or con side.  “Environmental groups and critic of biotechnology claim that >95% of consumers responding to surveys indicate that they want GM content to be labeled, but surveys for the biotech industry show that only 2% of unprompted consumers ask for GM labeling” (Smyth and Phillips, 2003).  It really depends on how the questions are worded and the company paying to have the survey done.