



GMOs

Get your food labelled!

CAMPAIGN GOALS

- Compulsory labelling should be implemented in all countries to ensure consumer choice.
- Codex Alimentarius should enact strong guidelines on the labelling of GM products.

Why is labelling of products containing GMOs important?

Labels give vital information about the ingredients in our food. Consumers have the right to know what they are purchasing and eating. When products are appropriately labelled, consumers are able to make informed choices based on safety, environmental, ethical and religious concerns.

Surveys have found that most people want to know if their food contains GMOs. But biotech companies and some governments prefer that consumers do not have the necessary information to make informed choices.

Mounting public concern has convinced a growing number of governments to introduce legislation to label GM foods.

Labelling models

There are three basic models of labelling for GMOs:

- **Full:** Label all GMOs and their derivatives, regardless of whether they can be detected. This is the position of the European Union.
- **Partial:** Label for detectable GM DNA and/or protein. This is the policy advanced by the governments of Australia, New Zealand, Japan and Thailand.
- **No special labelling:** This is the policy of the US, Canadian and Argentine governments.

Positive vs. negative labelling

Positive labelling requires identifying the existence of GM content. Negative labelling identifies the absence of GM content – e.g. "Does Not Contain GM Ingredients", "Free of GMOs" or "GM Free."



About a third of the world's population live in countries that have mandatory labelling of GMO food, including citizens of Australia, Brazil, China, Japan and the European Union.

GMO labelling regulations

• European Union

The European Union's new Regulation on GM Food and Feed Labelling entered into force in October 2003 and is among the strictest in the world. As the first comprehensive labelling regime for GM foods, incorporating additional regulations on traceability, it now sets the global standard.

The Regulation makes two major advances by establishing mandatory labelling of:

- GM animal feed, a requirement previously applied to food only.
- all products derived from GM ingredients, irrespective of whether the GM derivative can be detected in the final product.

The Regulation will have major repercussions on future market development of GM crops, vegetables, fruits and food and feed products derived from GMOs. The EU law is applicable in one of the world's largest single markets for food (455 million consumers) and its provisions affect more than 90% of GM foods imported to Europe.

The rules cover imported bulk commodities (e.g. soya and maize) and imported food and food ingredients. Among the imports with GM content are a wide range of processed foods, including chocolate bars, oil-packed canned tuna and sardines, soft drinks with glucose sweeteners, and all processed food with emulsifiers and starch.

The EU regulation is an important advance, but it is not ideal. One loophole exempts labelling for meat and dairy products from animals raised on GM-feed. Some UK supermarkets, however, do voluntarily extend their identity preservation (IP) systems to animal feed for certain products.

Has your government enacted labelling legislation for products containing GMOs? Check your country status. Download the Center for Food Safety charts at: www.consumersinternational.org/wcrd. Let your government authorities know what you think!

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How the EU regulation works

All manufacturers placing GM food on the market in the EU must provide information on GM content. Positive labelling must be used and this must clearly identify any GM ingredients.

All products containing, consisting of or derived from an ingredient with more than 0.9% GMO content must be labelled as follows: "This product contains genetically modified organisms" or "This product is produced from genetically modified organisms."

All GM derivatives must be labelled. The exception is for manufacturers who have identity preservation (IP) systems in place and are able to show that any contamination was accidental. In this case, a 0.9% threshold applies. For accidental contamination by products that have not been approved in the EU but which have undergone a risk assessment, a 0.5% threshold applies.

Labelling is also required where the specific DNA or protein of the GMO can no longer be identified in the final product. If testing cannot detect genetically modified DNA or protein in any of the separate ingredients, its origin must be verified through the traceability (record-keeping) mechanisms also outlined in the new regulation. This is often the case for products such as oils, sugars and starches.

The maximum threshold for GM contamination exempted from labelling requirements refers to each separate ingredient in a product. For example, 0.9% GM in the lecithin (emulsifier) used in a chocolate bar triggers labelling of the whole bar, which itself may only contain 0.5% lecithin.

• Asia

In 2002, the People's Republic of China announced plans to introduce mandatory GM food labelling. China's regulation includes seeds, animal feed and food products containing GMOs. The regulation, which makes it illegal to sell unlabelled GMO foodstuffs, is contained in the broader framework of its Biosafety Regulation of GMOs in Agriculture. This requires that all releases of GMOs into the environment be approved by authorities, and that safety certifications be obtained for imports.

China's regulations are forcing its neighbours to move quickly, as food exporters in the region must now meet these strict labelling rules when trading with China.

Japan, South Korea, Taiwan and Thailand have adopted labelling schemes similar to the Australian model (*see below*), but more limited in scope. These schemes do not apply to all foodstuffs. Japan, Thailand, Taiwan and Australia apply a GMO threshold of 5%, whereas South Korea applies a 3% threshold.

• Australia

Only foods with GM proteins detectable in testing must be labelled. This exempts foods with ingredients made from animals raised on GM feed – including meat, milk, eggs and honey. It also exempts food with highly-refined GM ingredients, like cooking oils, sugars and starches. Most processed foods come into this category.



• Brazil

Regulations adopted in Brazil include mandatory use of a symbol indicating GM content. The yellow triangle with a "T" (for "transgenic") is easily understood by people with limited reading skills.

• Elsewhere

Other countries that have introduced mandatory GM food labelling systems include Croatia, Norway, Russia, Switzerland, Saudi Arabia and New Zealand.

No mandatory labels

• US, Canada, Argentina

The three largest producers of GMOs – United States, Canada and Argentina – have no mandatory labelling requirements for GM food. Consumers in these countries are unable to exercise their right to know which foods contain GM ingredients. In fact, consumers are often unaware that they are eating GMOs.

In these countries the labelling of GM foods is voluntary. However, it is unlikely that manufacturers will voluntarily label GM products.

The US Food and Drug Administration has expressed its reservations about "negative" labelling of products as "GM-free or "Not

Genetically Engineered". As a result, negative labelling may face burdensome regulations in the future, while current rules allow GM food makers to continue to use genetically engineered ingredients in secret.

Compulsory labelling of GM content is the best solution to guarantee that consumers are informed and can select the foods they want. But where mandatory labelling is not in force, negative labelling offers consumers a limited opportunity to exercise choice.

CALL FOR ACTION

- **Press for Codex Alimentarius** to adopt an international guideline for compulsory, comprehensive labelling of GM foods
- **Press national governments** to move as quickly as possible to implement comprehensive GM labelling regulations.
- **Press for GM labelling to be positive, not negative.** With positive labelling, GM foods must be labelled as such.
- **Where labelling does exist, press for improvements**, for example, to lower the threshold for GM ingredients or to extend regulations to cover meat and dairy products from animals raised on GM feed.

Sources

EU Regulation on GM Food and Feed Labelling, DG Health and Consumer Protection section, European Commission

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