GMO Food Labeling Issue Resurfaces and Gains Some Momentum

Since the introduction of genetically modified (GMO) foods in the U.S. in the mid-1990s there have been failed initiatives at both the federal and state levels to require mandatory labeling of GMO foods. Alaska has been the only state to pass a GMO food labeling law and it applies to fish and mollusks only.

GMOs are created by the manipulation of an organism’s genes by introducing, eliminating or rearranging genes using the methods of modern molecular biology. The most common genetically modified crops in the U.S. are corn, soybean, cotton and canola. According the Grocery Manufacturers Association, an estimated 80 percent of processed foods contain GMO ingredients.

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration’s (FDA) regulations state that a new biotech food that is substantially equivalent (meaning that it has the same chemical composition and nutritional value as conventional varieties) does not require a special label. It states that requiring the labeling of foods that are indistinguishable from food produced through traditional methods would mislead consumers by falsely implying differences where non exist. FDA does require labeling of GMO foods if the food has a significantly different nutritional property; if a new food includes an allergen that consumers would not expect to be present; or if a food contains a toxicant beyond acceptable limits.

CALIFORNIA BALLOT INITIATIVE POSSIBLE
There appears to be a resurgence of interest in mandatory GMO labeling among consumers as lawmakers in 18 states have introduced bills in the past year to label GMO foods. In California, proponents are gathering signatures to get the issue on a ballot initiative in November. A bicameral letter from 55 members of Congress in March asked FDA to require labeling of GMO foods. The Center for Food Safety’s “Just Label It” campaign sent a petition with one million signatures to FDA urging the agency to label GMO foods. Per its policy, FDA only counts separate petitions/comments, not the number of signatures on a petition. So, officially, FDA received only 394 comments on the issue. FDA responded to petitioners that it had not made a decision.

“About ten years ago, several states introduced labeling bills that didn’t go anywhere,” says Jim Eichhorst, the Biotechnology Industry Organization’s (BIO) manager for state government relations in 13 Midwestern states. “Currently there are bills in 18 states regarding labeling of GMO foods. The language in these bills is nearly identical so it seems there is a concerted effort by activist groups who don’t support mainstream agriculture to pass such legislation. We don’t expect these bills to move forward with perhaps the exception of the ballot initiative in California.” So far, Connecticut is the only state to have a bill make it out of committee.

Minnesota had a GMO labeling bill (H.F. 2808) introduced late in the session, but no hearings were scheduled, notes Cory Bennett, lobbyist for the Minnesota Agri-Growth Council. An amendment to the House Omnibus Agricultural Policy bill to form a task force to look at GMO labeling failed on the House floor in a bipartisan manner. “Food labeling is an issue that should be dealt with at the federal level not at the state level,” says Bennett.

RESERVE MANDATORY LABELS FOR FOOD SAFETY ISSUES
BIO, the American Farm Bureau, the Grocery Manufacturers Association and most food manufacturers are opposed to extra mandated labeling, according to Karen Batra, director of communications for BIO. “Foods derived from agricultural biotechnology have been eaten by billions of people over the last 16 years without a single documented health problem. There is an international scientific consensus on the safety of biotech products,” she says.

The United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization, the World Health Organization, the National Research Council of the National Academies of Sciences, the American Medical Association and the American Dietetic Association, as well as the regulatory authorities for each of the products have concluded that foods with biotech-derived ingredients pose no more risk to people than any other food.

“GMO labeling will provide no useful information to consumers and they will have to bear the burden of new documentation,” says Batra. Eichhorst agrees, “GMO labeling won’t tell anything about the nutritional value or safety of the food. It will only confuse consumers and increase the price.

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Member In Focus

Company: BNSF Railway
Website: www.bnsf.com
Locations: BNSF owns and operates over 1,500 route miles of track in Minnesota. We have major rail yards in Minneapolis, St. Paul, Willmar and Dilworth, and intermodal hub centers in St Paul and Dilworth. Shop facilities are located in Brainerd, Dilworth and Minneapolis, and administrative offices are in St. Paul.

BNSF Railway’s roots in Minnesota date back to 1862 and the first 10 miles of railroad in the state. Those tracks remain a significant part of BNSF’s 32,000-mile network in 28 states and two Canadian Provinces. Today, BNSF has more than 1,750 employees in Minnesota.

BNSF Railway is one of North America’s leading freight transportation companies. We are one of the top transporters of consumer goods, grain, industrial goods and low-sulfur coal that help feed, clothe, supply, and power American homes and businesses every day. BNSF and its employees have developed one of the most technologically advanced and efficient railroads in the industry. And we are working continuously to improve the value of the safety, service, energy, and environmental benefits we provide to our customers and the communities we serve.

Q & A with Brian Sweeney,
Regional AVP, State Government Affairs:
What do you move in Minnesota?
BNSF links Minnesota’s products to the rest of the nation and the world. We connect this state to Mexico, to the West Coast and Gulf Coast ports and beyond. We move more than 2 million carloads of freight in Minnesota every year. Of those, 127,000 contain Minnesota corn, wheat, soybeans and other ag products. We also move the state’s timber and paper products, as well as taconite from the Iron Range. BNSF delivers low-sulfur coal to Minnesota power plants and a variety of consumer products to the state’s retailers and businesses through our leading intermodal transportation service.

What are BNSF’s plans in the state for the year ahead?
BNSF is committed to making needed investments to maintain and grow our capacity to meet customers’ needs and to provide the nation’s supply chain with more efficient freight transportation.

This year BNSF announced a 2012 capital commitment program of about $3.9 billion, a $400 million increase over 2011. Much of this will be spent on our core network and assets and on locomotive and freight car acquisitions. In Minnesota, our investments this year will include upgrading several rail sidings on our route from Willmar through southwestern Minnesota, as well as upgrading signals to meet federally mandated positive train control and continuing our active maintenance program throughout the state.

What are the key issues or trends affecting your industry?
A growing worldwide population will result in greater demand for goods of all kinds. Rail is an economic and environmental solution. Shifting more freight to rail relieves highway congestion, improves air quality and safety, and increases economic development, energy security and global competitiveness. BNSF Railway is investing in our infrastructure today so we can continue connecting Minnesota and Minnesota products to the rest of the world.
Social Media Focuses More Attention on Food and Food Labeling

Social media is playing a growing role in consumer activism relating to food. And, it’s focusing more attention on consumers’ right to know. When information gets online – whether it’s right, wrong or indifferent – it moves quickly and widely.

A case in point is the recent uproar over chemically-treated beef trimmings called lean finely textured beef (LFTB) by the food industry, but dubbed pink slime by its opponents. YouTube videos and online petitions triggered a public outcry by consumers. Soon many grocers and fast food chains discontinued sales of ground beef with LFTB and the USDA offered National School Lunch Program participants the choice of beef with or without LFTB. As a result, Beef Products Inc. had to shutdown three of its four plants that make LFTB and another processor filed for bankruptcy. LFTB has been approved for public sale by federal food safety regulators for the past two decades. The low fat beef trimmings make up about 15 percent of some ground beef, reducing overall fat content and the price of the product.

The Hy-Vee grocery chain is one company that has changed its position and has decided to sell beef with and without the additive saying it will clearly identify the “lean, finely textured beef” in the meat counter. Hy-Vee released this statement, “We heard from many customers who asked us to continue carrying this product. They’ve sent us a clear message: They want a choice when it comes to ground beef and they want to support companies that provide thousands of jobs in our Midwest trade area.”

This year, the Minnesota Senate adopted an amendment by a vote of 45-10 that would require ground beef containing LFTB or boneless lean beef trimmings sold to schools or the public to be labeled if it was treated with ammonia gas or citric acid. Notwithstanding that these food manufacturing processes are FDA approved and likely are preempted by federal law.

U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack and the governors of Iowa, Texas and Nebraska have been defending the processors and touting the safety and benefits of LFTB to citizens. For more information on the process check out the website, www.beefisbeef.com.

Annual AgPAC Golf Outing at Valley View Golf Club
SAVE THE DATE: JUNE 11, 2012

The Minnesota Agri-Growth Council annually hosts the Minnesota AgPAC Golf Tournament in June. The outing is an opportunity for Agri-Growth members and other agriculture and food industry leaders to network, while raising funds for the Minnesota AgPAC, a political fund that benefits the state’s agriculture and food industry. Learn more and register your company foursome at www.agrigrowth.org/golf.

WHEN: June 11, 11:30 lunch and a shot-gun start at noon
WHERE: Valley View Golf Club, Belle Plaine, MN
WHO: Agri-Growth members as well as agriculture and food industry leaders

Interested in sponsoring? We have several exclusive sponsorships available, contact Tony today to confirm your sponsorship! Contact Tony at info@agrigrowth.org or 651.905.8900.

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of food.” They say consumers who don’t want to buy GMO foods can purchase certified organic products. Another option is for food manufacturers to voluntarily label or market food products using “non-GMO” ingredients.

Labels on food products have been proliferating. In addition to government-mandated labels for health, safety, and nutrition, food manufacturers use voluntary labels to positively differentiate their product’s attributes.

Mike Erlandson, vice president of government affairs for SuperValu says that grocers and food manufacturers are always trying to educate consumers so they can make informed choices, but they rely on the FDA and USDA to regulate food safety and quality through science-based evaluations. “For a legislative body to place mandatory labeling requirements that are not science-based on a product is not necessarily something that is of value to the consumer,” says Erlandson. “I wouldn’t preclude it from being appropriate, but it is most appropriate that food safety agencies make these decisions.”

LABELING IS A NATIONAL ISSUE
If the issue gets on the California ballot and passes it could impact other states. “California is the 8th largest economy in the world. What happens there has a tendency to spread,” says Erlandson.

Jamie Pfuhl, president of the Minnesota Grocers Association says, “It’s disheartening when we see labeling legislation introduced at the state level. Obviously no state can become an island so we do believe it needs to be addressed on a federal level so there are consistencies for grocers and manufacturer partners with products in multiple states. We believe in an unbiased scientific approach to educating the public on biotechnology and GMO foods.”

Some proponents of labeling say the issue isn’t about food safety, but about consumers’ right to know. They note many other countries require labeling of genetically engineered food. They also note that in polls consumers overwhelmingly support labeling of GMO foods. A polling commissioned by the “Just Label It” group found 91 percent of voters support labeling of GMO foods while 5 percent oppose such a move. As with most surveys a lot depends on how the question is phrased and how much information is provided. A 2010 Consumer Survey for the International Food Information Council found that consumer satisfaction with current information on food labels remains high. Only 18 percent of consumers supported additional information on food labels, with only three percent supporting the labeling of biotech foods.