GM food singled out for labeling in the US

In March, Secretary of Agriculture Dan Glickman and other officials of the US Department of Agriculture (USDA; Washington, DC) presented a revised proposal for nationwide standards defining organic foods—one that specifically prohibits the use of genetic engineering from agricultural products bearing the organic label. A few weeks earlier, Senator Barbara Boxer (D-CA) had introduced legislation, the "Genetically Engineered Food Right-to-Know Act" (S. 2080), that would mandate labels specifying whether a product contains or was produced with genetically modified (GM) materials. These two matters appear to occupy separate domains in Washington, yet they might lead to a workable compromise on what is proving to be a chronically divisive set of issues.

The newly issued proposal for organic standards revises a set of proposals made by USDA officials two years ago (*Nat. Biotechnol.* **16**, 128, Feb. '98). Those proposals prompted an immense public outcry, providing USDA with an unprecedented glut of 275,603 comments and leading officials to rewrite the initial proposal from "top to bottom," Glickman says. In particular, the original proposal left open the possibility of using three controversial practices—genetic engineering, food irradiation, and fertilizing crops with reclaimed urban sludge—that organic farmers, consumers, and activists expressly said they did not want.

In heeding critical comments on those practices and now excluding them from products qualifying for the organic label, USDA is "giving consumers a choice and taking the guesswork out of the process," Glickman says. However, the organic label is "not a judgment about quality or safety," he adds. "It's a process claim…about how a product is made" and should not be "confused with other issues" involving genetically engineered foods. "We grade meat and eggs, but that doesn't imply that one grade is safer than another," he points out.

Meanwhile, two similar bills calling for mandatory labeling of foods containing GM ingredients have been submitted—one by Senator Boxer early this year, and another, designated H.R. 3377, late in 1999 by Representative Dennis Kucinich (D-OH). Boxer's bill pertains specifically to any foods derived from "an organism that has been altered at the molecular or cellular level by means that are not possible under natural conditions or processes," or if the food derives from an animal or plant that is fed or injected with GM material. The two bills also seek to protect farmers whose crops inadvertently come to contain GM material, such as through pollen drift, and both would impose steep civil penalties for deliberate violations of the labeling requirement. The Senate version would authorize the Secretary of Health and Human Services to sponsor research into the health and environmental risks that some critics claim to be associated with growing and consuming GM organisms for agricultural purposes.

The Boxer bill does not impose testing to verify GM content but, instead, would depend on a system of written guaranties as well as a "chain of custody" to validate claims on a particular product label. In a similar fashion, the revised organic proposals from USDA do not depend on testing for GM content but on "audit trails" to assure that there is no "opportunity for co-mingling" of organic and GM ingredients in products that qualify for the organic label, according to Glickman.

Not surprisingly, the Boxer and Kucinich bills are being endorsed by consumer and environmentalist groups, including a coalition of some 60 organizations whose support efforts are being coordinated by the Consumer's Choice Council (Washington, DC), according to its director of federal relations, Cameron Griffith. "A big education will be needed in this debate," he says, referring to forthcoming discussions expected in Congress. "We see it gaining momentum."

However, industry representatives suggest that there is little momentum behind either of these bills on Capitol Hill. Their sponsors thus may be "tilting at windmills," says Val Giddings, vice president for food and agriculture at the Biotechnology Industry Organization (BIO; Washington, DC). Moreover, because a statewide initiative for GM labeling failed to muster anywhere near the number of signatures required for it to appear on the California (Boxer's state) ballot, some of the "wind is out of Boxer's sails," adds BIO executive director for food and agriculture Michael Phillips.

Meanwhile, the initial reaction at BIO to the USDA revised organic proposals is not all that favorable, as they seem to represent the department "giving in to a campaign from pressure groups," Giddings says, noting: "Scientific justification or rationality seem to be missing" from the proposals; "we'd hope for a nod in that direction when setting federal standards." Moreover, he adds, Glickman's description of the organic standards representing a purely "process" issue "appears to be arbitrary and willy-nilly." Nonetheless, Phillips points out, because there appears to be such a high correlation between those who prefer organic foods and others who are demanding labels indicating GM food, perhaps this USDA move will "basically take care of that concern."

Jeffrey L. Fox

French genomics setup questioned

At the beginning of March, an initial request for projects went out for GenHomme, France's attempt to cash in on functional genomics. The program comes four years after public funds were spent to support the broadly criticized Bio Avenir program. Although efforts have been made to avoid the centralization that plagued that initiative, some are skeptical of GenHomme's success, citing either fragmentation of resources or the fundamental stifling of entrepreneurial spirit in the country. Moreover, others criticize the entire project, pointing out that for the EU to be truly competitive, genomics programs should be undertaken on a pan-European level rather than through individual country efforts.

GenHomme, a five-year genomics program, was launched on December 3, 1999 by France's Education, Science and Technology and Industry Ministries. By working with industry to finance projects arising from Génopôles—a national network of genomics research centers established last year—it is hoped GenHomme will promote the creation of genomics start-ups and develop genomics technology platforms, ultimately resulting in new drugs, diagnostics, and therapies. "The aim of the project is to accelerate technology transfer and innovation from the human genome data," explains Jacques Haiech, deputy director of the genomics program at the Education, Science, and Technology Ministry.

Pascal Brandys, chair of the French Bioindustry association France Biotech and CEO of genomics company Genset (Paris), cautions GenHomme participants to concentrate on specific programs that combine genomics expertise with clinical applications. Haiech suggests an example might be to use existing biopsy databases from research laboratories to develop cancer tumor tests.

GenHomme has a budget of FF1 billion (US $147 million) that will increase by FF200 million (US $29 million) annually, adding to the FF500 million (US $73 million) currently spent on genomics by the French government. GenHomme plans to allocate between FF1 million and FF30 million to each project

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