

U.K. supermarket labels recombinant foods

LONDON—CWS Retail (Manchester), a major food retail chain, has introduced self-imposed regulations governing the sale of genetically engineered foods by its Co-op supermarkets in Britain. Indeed, CWS' brand of cheese produced with recombinant rennet now bears a new label that reads, "Produced using gene technology and so free from animal rennet." Rennet—an enzyme from the lining of calves' stomachs—coagulates milk and is, thus, used in cheese making.

CWS is responding more to consumer demand than to current U.K. regulatory thinking, as 85 percent of U.K. consumers polled in a recent survey agree that supermarkets should label foodstuffs containing genetically engineered organisms. At present there are no U.K. regulations defining labeling of novel foods, though the U.K. is leaning toward a position that would require labels on foods containing genes from humans or genes from animals that are the subject of religious dietary restrictions, as well as labels on plant or microbial material containing animal genes. But there would be no requirement to label if inserted genes had been destroyed by processing.

This is the case with CWS' labeled cheese, as it contains no recombinant genes since the recombinant rennet is destroyed by the production process. However, a CWS spokesman believes that the regulations the U.K. favors "are a bit of a con." CWS, he adds, will "always label if gene technology is used in food production," whether or not the food contains any recombinant genes. CWS, moreover, has stated that it will not sell products containing human genes, that its branded products will not contain fruits or vegetables modified with animal genes, and that all its branded products containing genes from unrelated species will be labeled. Yet other U.K. supermarket chains have not introduced such technology-specific labels, including Asda (Leeds), Sainsbury (London), and Tesco (Cheshunt), all of which have sold the recombinant-rennet-produced cheese.

As it stands, the U.K. government's thinking on food labeling

goes beyond what most European industry associations would like to see. For instance, the Confederation of the Food and Drink Industries (CIAA, Brussels), the European food sector's industry association, believes that labeling requirements for novel foods that mix scientific and ethical judgments, like those in the U.K., are neither valid nor workable. The CIAA wants novel-food labels only where a compositional change has affected the nutritional value or digestion/metabolism of a food product.

Regarding food labeling, though, the U.K. government will ultimately have to abide by the European Union's (EU, Brussels) "Regulation on Novel Foods and Novel Food Ingredients." As it is a regulation, its rules will directly apply to all EU member states and will not require additional national legislation. Yet the novel-food regulation has endured a tortured path through the EU regulatory system. Most recently, the European Commission (EC), which advises the European Parliament (EP), countered an EP call for the introduction of "systematic technology-specific labeling" of foods containing genetically modified organisms or produced with their aid. Specifically, the EC said last December that such systematic labeling would "tend to stigmatize biotechnology, while providing little useful information for the customer." The EC, however, did propose that authorization to market a novel food should include specific labeling requirements where there are "significant differences" in the characteristics of the novel food when compared to conventional foods.

But the exact meaning of "significant differences" remains unclear. According to Kirtikumar Mehta of the EC's Industry Directorate, relevant questions might include "Is it possible that the food might cause an allergy?" and "Is there anything in the food that the consumer does not expect to find?" The presence of a peanut gene in a novel food, for instance, might warrant additional labeling because of the high incidence of allergies to peanuts.

Just what a label should say is also not clear. Says Mehta, "The EC

wants labels to give functional information. And it recommends that voluntary labeling should not be excluded unless it is misleading." This would seem to be in line with U.S. policies on novel-food labeling. For instance, guidance from the Food and Drug Administration (FDA, Rockville, MD) indicates that labeling milk as free of recombinant bovine somatotropin (BST) could be misleading, because it implies a difference in the composition, safety, or quality of milk from BST-treated cows, compared to milk from cows not treated with BST.

Where does that leave CWS' labeled cheese? If FDA standards are applied, the label is misleading, as it implies a compositional difference where there is none. The label, though, does explain one advantage of recombinant rennet, that extraction of the enzyme from calves' stomachs is no longer necessary. It would be a shame for biotechnology to lose such good, free publicity.

—Louise Dughan

CWS is responding more to consumer demand than to current U.K. regulatory thinking.

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BIOMEVA GmbH
Czernyring 22
D-69115 Heidelberg
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