

THIS WEEK

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Closing the label door

The US Senate has agreed a curious compromise on how to identify GM foods. Researchers and policymakers must now tackle more pressing issues with the technology.

Of all the debates over genetically modified (GM) crops, arguments on the need for labels to identify GM food might seem one of the more trivial. From a scientific point of view, by the time a product has reached the shelves, the various tests and standards have long assured its safety. Safety seems the only rational reason for shoppers to reject a food, and therefore the only need for a label.

The problem with that attitude is that it helps to explain why the lack of labelling of GM foods has created so much controversy. If consumers feel that they are being denied a choice, then they tend to object. Hiding information about ingredients has made consumers wonder why it was hidden. It has created an atmosphere that has fostered conspiracy theories, not a deeper understanding of the issues at hand.

Last week, the US Senate passed a bill that will finally create federal standards for GM labels. Widely expected to be passed by the House of Representatives, the bill is clearly a political compromise. Like many good solutions to complex problems, it leaves both sides in the debate feeling hard done by. The law gives federal regulators responsibility to develop mandatory labelling standards, but does not require labels to be printed directly on the products. Instead, consumers can be directed to a website, for example.

It is a solution that could create fairly obscure labels and fully satisfies neither of the two vigorous and vocal sides in the debate. Those are the activists, who argue that consumers should have ready access to information about their food, and the industry lobbyists, who argue that such labels would unfairly taint GM foods — products that a panel convened by the US National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine reported, again, in May are safe to eat.

The curious decision reflects the pressure of the atmosphere in which it was forged. Members of the US Senate agricultural committee have been scrambling to find a palatable national standard for months, under intense pressure from industry. The clock was ticking: on 1 July, Vermont became the first US state to enact a law governing such labels, and food manufacturers faced an emerging and confusing regulatory patchwork as other states followed suit.

Now, at least, those who are motivated will be able to find the information they seek. And because federal law trumps state regulations, the new system seems more workable and sensible. The state initiatives seem unusually broad given that the country grows so many GM crops. Whereas some countries provide exemptions for ingredients that are present in trace amounts, or for foods in which the product of genetic engineering — for example, the protein responsible for tolerance to an herbicide — is no longer present, Vermont's law provided no such distinction.

The Senate compromise also promises to address the patchwork problem. The Vermont law, for example, could not supersede the US

Department of Agriculture's authority over certain meat products. As a result, a frozen cheese pizza could require a label if it contains oil made from transgenic soya beans, whereas the same pizza with added pepperoni might not. Federal legislation would do away with such artificial and bewildering distinctions.

But perhaps more importantly, quenching the labelling debate could open the door to discussions about more pressing matters.

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Vast resources — both time and money — have been poured into the labelling debate. There is an opportunity now to redirect those resources.

In June, the US Environmental Protection Agency's inspector general determined that the agency was not doing enough to cope with the rise of insects resistant to the pesticide produced by some GM crops. Superweeds that are resistant to the herbicides used on certain GM crops are also plaguing farms. And sophisticated gene-editing technologies are helping to bring a new breed of engineered crops to market, yet regulators are still grappling with how to handle them.

Each of these issues is steeped in complex science, and researchers should seize every opportunity to inform — and encourage — discussions around them. The battle over labels has been bruising, and many researchers are hesitant to enter the fray surrounding GM crops. But without their input, the discussion is unlikely to progress. ■

Lend me your ears

A study of how people perceive music shows that jarring chords are a cultural contrivance.

Writing about music has been compared to dancing about architecture, but bear with us.

Santa Maria is a village in western Bolivia without running water or electricity, and so remote that it can be reached only by canoeing up a tributary of the Amazon. It is home to the Tsimané' people, who detect no difference between consonant and dissonant sounds — the relationships between notes that make, for example, 'Eleanor Rigby' by The Beatles sound so sad.

Dissonant chords are the unstable isotopes of Western music; they sound tense and want to revert to more stable forms. The way that composers create and resolve this tension usually invokes different moods in the listener. But not in the Tsimané'.

As researchers describe in a paper this week, when they tested