

# Foodstuff

## 'Genetically Modified' On the Label Means ...Well, It's Hard to Say

Attempt at Clarity in U.K.  
Brings Much Confusion;  
FDA Studies the Issue

'Non-GM' Isn't 'GM-Free'

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LONDON—It seems simple enough: Let consumers know when they're buying bioengineered food by requiring a label. It's an idea being promoted heavily in the U.S. by groups such as Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth, and even by some members of Congress.

But a trip up and down the supermarket aisles of Britain, which has required such labeling since March, shows the new law hasn't exactly made things easier for discerning shoppers. Rather, it has spawned a bewildering array of marketing claims, counterclaims and outright contradictions that only a food scientist possibly could unravel.

Take cheese. One supermarket chain here labels its cheese as being "made using genetic modification," the European catchword for bioengineering. But other supermarket chains, whose cheese is made exactly the same way, haven't changed their labels, saying the cheese itself contains no genetically modified ingredients.

Then there's Birds Eye frozen beef burgers. The label on a box purchased last week states that one ingredient, soya protein, is "produced from genetically modified soya." But a spokesman for maker Unilever PLC insists that the soya isn't genetically modified. The company has reformulated the product, he explains, but has yet to replace the box.

Yes or No?

Confused yet? Then scan over the small print on a Haagen-Dazs chocolate-covered ice-cream bar. No genetically modified ingredients listed there. But consumers who question the company about it are sent a letter stating that the bar's chocolate coatings, in fact, contain soya oil that "may have been derived from genetically modified soya, but it is identical to any other soya oil and therefore does not contain any genetically modified material." The letter adds, "We are, however, investigating whether there are suitable alternative oils."

All of this may seem puzzling to American shoppers, who so far aren't up in arms over whether the food they buy includes ingredients that have been tinkered with in a laboratory. After all, that's already the case with many U.S. products. But European consumers, who have lived through such recent food scares as beef linked to "mad cow" disease, salmonella-contaminated eggs and dioxin-tainted animal feed, are taking no chances, even though there's no proof that bioengineered foods pose any health risks.

### Monster Mash

The result has been a biotech backlash that at times borders on hysteria. In Britain, tabloid newspapers routinely refer to genetically modified products as "Frankenstein food." One prisoner even went on a hunger strike demanding that no genetically modified food be served to inmates.

Critics say bioengineered foods offer consumers no obvious benefit and that despite industry and government assurances, not enough research has been done to assure they are safe. Environmental groups have expressed concern that genetically modified plants could have unintended side effects, including killing beneficial insects and, through the spread of pollen, promoting growth of herbicide-resistant "super weeds" and antibiotic-resistant "super bugs." Others fear genetically modified foods could cause dangerously allergic reactions in some people.

In response to widespread consumer outcry, the European Union last year approved legislation that required its 15 member countries to begin labeling all foods that contain genetically modified ingredients, namely corn and soybean in which new genes have been added to provide traits such as insect resistance.

### American Reverberations

While no such plans have been announced in the U.S., the Food and Drug Administration said last week that it plans hearings around the country this fall to gauge public opinion on the issue. Already, several American health-food companies have begun slapping labels on their products declaring that they contain no genetically modified ingredients.

But before America leaps into mandatory labeling, the government, retailers and consumer groups might want to take a look at the far-reaching impact such a law has had in Britain.

When the European Union introduced its legislation last year, Britain's agriculture minister called it "a triumph for consumer rights to better information." Britain went on to enact the toughest labeling standards in Europe, requiring even restaurants, caterers and bakers to list genetically modified ingredients. Violations are punishable by fines of as much as \$8,400, and the government says it intends to conduct surveillance, including independent lab testing.

"This is not a health issue in any way," says J. R. Bell, head of the government's additives and novel-foods division, adding that his ministry believes the latest bioengineered products are safe. "This is a

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