GMO Labeling Bill Faces Industry Opposition

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By KRYSTAL GABERT, Editor, *Food Manufacturing*

A new ballot initiative in California seeks to identify food products that include genetically modified organisms (GMOs). Industry groups and food giants are pushing back on Proposition 37, but its passage could open the floodgates in other states, ushering in a new age of mandated sourcing transparency for food processors.

On November 4, 2012, Californians will have a momentous decision to make at the ballot box that could impact the financial security and health of future generations of Californians. No, I'm not talking about the Obama-Romney showdown, or even the decision between Senator Dianne Feinstein and challenger Elizabeth Emken. On the ballot along with these races and others will be Proposition 37, which, if passed, would make California the first state to require the labeling of GMOs on all food package labels.

In addition to requiring identification of genetically modified ingredients, Proposition 37 would prohibit products made with such ingredients from being labeled as natural. These new regulations could especially impact snack food manufacturers who are more likely than processors in other vertical food industry segments to source soybeans and corn, crops for which genetic engineering is quite common.

No on Prop. 37, the initiative that has sprung up to oppose the measure, has commissioned a study from Northbridge Environmental Management Consultants, which reports that, were Proposition 37 to pass, Californians would see their grocery bills increase by about $400 annually. Manufacturers and industry groups are also pushing back because the bill would either require an across-the-board recipe change, requiring a reformulation of GMO-free recipes, or it would require separate packaging to be used on GMO-containing products specifically sold in the California market.

In a press release, the Snack Foods Association (SFA) urges members and food processors to “help defeat Proposition 37,” which the association calls a “deceptive labeling scheme.” SFA defers to Jamie Johansson, a producer whose olives are used in olive oil processing and who calls Proposition 37 a “deceptive, special-interest measure that will have far-reaching negative consequences on consumers, taxpayers, farmers, grocers, small businesses and every Californian.”

Pamela Bailey, President of the Grocery Manufacturers Association (GMA), is widely reported as having said that defeating Proposition 37 is the “single highest priority for GMA this year.”
The GMA, DuPont and Monsanto are the largest contributors to the No on Prop. 37 initiative, with the SFA and others, including most of the major food industry associations, also contributing heavily to the cause. As of August 15, 2012, the California Right to Know Campaign, the group championing Proposition 37, reported Monsanto had donated over $4.2 million to No on Prop. 37.

The California Right to Know campaign has used massive donations like these to indict food giants and other contributors for what the group is framing as a lack of transparency. Stacy Malkan, Media Director for California Right to Know says, “The giant pesticide and food companies are afraid of the mothers and grandmothers who want the right to know what’s in our food. These companies will try to buy the election, but it won’t work. California moms and dads will prevail over Monsanto and DuPont.”

While No on Prop. 37 points to the chemical and structural sameness of GMO and non-GMO crops, California Right to Know has increasingly focused on studies that suggest GMO ingredients are metabolized and processed differently by the body — or, at least, the bodies of rats — and are therefore, the group claims, potentially unsafe. A new peer-reviewed study in Food and Chemical Toxicology reportedly shows a correlation between consumption of GMOs and the growth of mammary tumors in addition to kidney and liver damage in rats.

In response to the study, California Right to Know released a statement, which reads in part:

The results of this study are worrying. They underscore the importance of giving California families the right to know whether our food is genetically engineered, and to decide for ourselves whether we want to gamble with our health by eating GMO foods that have not been adequately studied and have not been proven safe.

Champions of the legislation say they’re not demanding GMOs be removed from food products, but rather that their inclusion be noted on package labels. They counter that their industry foes are fighting transparency. “Monsanto wants to buy this election so they can keep hiding what’s really in our food. They are on the losing side of history. Californians want the right to know what’s in our food, and we will win it,” said Gary Ruskin, Campaign Manager for Yes on Proposition 37.

If the Yes folks have their way, California could be the first state in the nation to

require this type of labeling, and could very well prompt other states to consider similar legislation. In surveying such a landscape, many food manufacturers may find that developing contingency plans for GMO labeling or product recipe reformulation is the safest course of action.

What's your take? Please feel free to comment below or email krystal.gabert@advantagemedia.com *[1].*

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