Labeling Bill Raises Modified Food Debate

Sara Burnett, AP

Over the past 16 years, biotechnology has helped Ron Moore grow crops that could survive drought, produce higher-quality grain to feed his livestock and yield sweet corn so plentiful his family has donated extras to the church and local food pantry. "People have said it's the best sweet corn they've ever eaten," said Moore, 57, whose family farms a few thousand acres near the western Illinois community of Roseville. However, the same scientific advances that have so greatly altered the agriculture industry also have made some consumers nervous about what they are putting in their bodies and what long-term effects it could have.

Now that battle has now come to Moore's home state.

Illinois Senator David Koehler, a Democrat from Peoria, says those concerns are behind legislation he proposed that would require the labeling of food produced with genetic engineering — often called "GMOs," or genetically modified organisms. Koehler, chairman of the Senate Agriculture Committee, convened a panel of lawmakers for three hearings on the bill over the summer to try to educate the public and the committee on the issue. Koehler's bill would require farmers and manufacturers to label any food that's available for retail sale in Illinois and that contains more than one percent of genetically engineered ingredients. The front or back of the package must clearly state "Produced with Genetic Engineering" or "Partially Produced with Genetic Engineering." The law would be enforced by the Department of Public Health, and producers could be fined for not properly labeling their products.

"For me it's a consumer transparency issue," Koehler said. "Do consumers have a right to know? I obviously believe they do." GMOs are plants whose DNA has been manipulated in a lab to resist drought, disease and insects and to increase yields. The European Union largely bans them, but most of the corn, soybean, cotton and sugar beets cultivated in the U.S. today contain plants that were genetically modified. They are particularly common in animal feed and processed foods. More than 60 countries have GMO labeling laws, according to the Center for Food Safety, a non-profit advocacy group. As efforts to pass a federal law in the U.S. haven't gained much traction, supporters have turned to state legislatures. The Center for Food Safety says labeling measures currently are pending in more than two dozen states. Only two — Maine and Connecticut — have approved them.

Advocates say Illinois is a key piece of the state-by-state approach because it's the nation's fifth most populous state and one of the biggest agricultural producers. "We're obviously the belly of the beast," said Jessica Fujan, the Chicago-based Midwest director for the consumer advocacy group Food and Water Watch. Fujan said the majority of consumers — herself included — want to know what they're eating and are bothered by the fact that some farmers and food industry giants don't want to be required to tell them.

Opponents of the measure say labeling could unnecessarily scare off consumers, burden farmers and other producers and ultimately drive up the cost of food. They also say if labeling cuts into profits enough, it could discourage companies from conducting further scientific research. "It will reduce the technological advances we've enjoyed in Illinois for the last 50 years," said Moore, president of the Illinois Soybean Association. "It'd be like going back to the rotary phone."

At the core of the debate is whether genetically engineered food is safe for human consumption. Most studies say it is, and the Food and Drug Administration has generally recognized them as safe. Moore notes that his own family eats the genetically modified products they grow on their farm and "I'm not concerned about it at all." Fujan and other opponents say there hasn't enough independent testing, particularly of the long-term health effects. Opponents also are concerned about the impact GMOs could have on the environment, and they say consumers already absorb increased costs when a company wants to change packaging to promote a new flavor or put a professional athlete on the front of a cereal box.

Koehler said the subcommittee of lawmakers that have been holding hearings on the issue will meet in Springfield during the fall veto session later this month to discuss what they heard. He doesn't expect to move further with the measure until the Legislature meets again early next year.

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