



State of Connecticut

SENATE

Testimony of Connecticut State Senator Donald E. Williams, Jr. President Pro Tempore, Connecticut Senate

Tuesday July 30, 2013

Ladies and Gentlemen, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony today on a very important issue for our nation's environment and public health.

I strongly believe that consumers all across the United States have a fundamental right to know what ingredients are contained in the food they eat and serve to their families. My name is Donald E. Williams, Jr. and I serve as President Pro Tempore of the Connecticut State Senate. Earlier this year, our state became the first in the country to adopt legislation requiring the labeling of food products that contain ingredients derived from genetically-modified organisms (GMOs).

Although Connecticut was first among the fifty states to adopt such a measure, it is far from unprecedented. To date, sixty-two other countries require labeling of products that contain GMOs, including the entire European Union, Japan, India, Korea, Australia, Russia, China, Brazil and South Africa.

New York's role in this truly global effort is critical. Connecticut's labeling law takes effect only when there is sufficient economy of scale such that the labeling requirement will not be burdensome. We opted to delay implementation of our labeling requirements until at least four other states with a combined population of over 20 million adopt a similar measure, including a state that borders Connecticut. New York can help meet this target and lead the rest of the country through the adoption of a GMO labeling law.

Rest assured, chemical companies and other interests that stand to profit from the ever-increasing proliferation of herbicides and pesticides will attempt to defeat this legislation. Our experience in Connecticut, however, is that the day when such special interests could derail common sense public policy – simple labeling for the benefit of our constituents – is over. Grassroots advocacy groups such as GMO Free CT and GMO Free NY reflect the overwhelming public support for this legislation.

Labeling of GMOs enjoys near unanimous support from the American public. A 2008 CBS/NYT poll found that 87% of US consumers want GMO ingredients labeled, and a 2010 Thomson Reuters survey found that 93% of US consumers support GMO labeling. On this issue, consumers are ahead of government policy. People are demanding to know what ingredients are

in their food, and they are right to insist on knowing whether their food has been genetically modified.

The most common argument for labeling of GMO products involves concerns about their impact on human health. While some scientists argue that it is too soon to say anything conclusive about the health effects of GMOs, a number of studies raise important red flags. A 2011 meta-analysis of 19 published studies involving mammals fed GMO corn or soy found damage in the kidney, liver and bone marrow, which could indicate the onset of chronic diseases.¹

In addition, many GMO crops are specifically designed for cultivation with large amounts of chemical pesticides, specifically “Roundup-ready” crops. The widespread use of Roundup-ready GMO crops in US agriculture has led to a dramatic increase in the amount of the chemical glyphosate (the active ingredient in Roundup) applied as weed killer on American farms.

Epidemiological studies show a link between Roundup/glyphosate and serious health problems, including: DNA damage, premature births and miscarriages, birth defects, multiple types of cancer, and disruption of neurological development in children.²

Overuse of this chemical has also produced an untold number of effects on the ecology of farmland in America and abroad. Many weed species are rapidly evolving a resistance to the chemical, resulting in new “super weeds” that are extremely difficult for farmers to control.³ A recent study also points to a single-year 59% decrease in the population of migratory monarch butterflies in Mexico due to glyphosate application to milkweed, their primary food source.⁴

These insects are key pollinators of many plants and crops in both Mexico and the United States, and their diminished population could have a ripple effect on interconnected habitats and species across North America.

GMO crops themselves also directly threaten our country’s natural ecology outside of farmer’s fields. Once planted, the genetically-modified plants cannot be entirely contained, and commonly spread into the wild or into non-GMO crop fields. A professor at the University of Arkansas recently found that genetically modified canola had spread “nearly everywhere” across the State of North Dakota.⁵

This widespread cultivation of GMO crops and attendant increase of harsh chemicals into multiple ecosystems is an experiment that is unprecedented in the history of agriculture. The full and long-term consequences to our environment and our health are yet to be seen.

¹ Séralini, G-E, Mesnage, R., Clair, E., Gress, S., de Vendômois, JS and D. Cellier. 2011. Genetically modified crops safety assessments: present limits and possible improvements. Environmental Sciences Europe, 23: 10. At: <http://www.enveurope.com/content/pdf/2190-4715-23-10.pdf>

² See Antoniou, Robinson, and Fagan, 2012, “GMO Myths and Truths,” Page 66. Their report cites 10 separate studies in support of these claims.

³ http://www.nytimes.com/2010/05/04/business/energy-environment/04weed.html?pagewanted=all&_r=2&

⁴ <http://articles.latimes.com/2013/mar/13/world/la-fg-mexico-butterflies-20130314>

⁵ <http://www.scientificamerican.com/article.cfm?id=genetically-modified-crop>

It is important to bear in mind that “GMO” is not a single chemical or ingredient, and that just as there are an infinite number of possible DNA sequences, there are an infinite number of potential GMOs that could be developed and introduced over time, each with unique characteristics and effects. One GMO is not necessarily like another and each should be evaluated separately in terms of its safety and environmental impact before going to market. Unfortunately, there is no standardized testing or approval process for GMO products in the United States. The US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) does not and has never systematically tested or approved GMO products. Since the 1990s the FDA has operated under an official presumption that all GMOs, unilaterally, are “substantially equivalent” to their naturally occurring counterparts.

As a result of this lack of oversight on an issue as fundamental as the safety of our food, The American Medical Association voted in 2012 in favor of “mandatory premarket systematic safety assessments of bioengineered foods.”

For all of these reasons, and due to a lack of Federal engagement on this issue, we decided to take action in Connecticut. Our legislation does not ban the consumption, sale or cultivation of genetically modified organisms. It simply requires that they be labeled, so consumers can make informed decisions about the products they support and choose to serve on the family table.

To be specific, our law requires labeling of food intended for human consumption that is entirely or partially genetically-engineered. Entirely or partially genetically-engineered seed or seed stock that is intended to produce food for human consumption must also be labeled.

The labels themselves must bear the words “Produced with Genetic Engineering” and be printed in the same size and font as the ingredients on the product’s nutritional facts panel. Packaged foods must be labeled on the package. Wholesale foods must be labeled on the bill of sale, and raw agricultural commodities must also be labeled on the retail store shelf or bin.

We have allowed a few exceptions to our labeling requirements. Food prepared and intended for immediate consumption in a restaurant or similar location need not be labeled. Food products sold at a farmer’s market, roadside stand, or pick-your-own farm are also exempt.

We have also opted to hold food producers, rather than retailers, accountable for meeting the labeling requirements. Retailers may not be penalized for failure to label a GMO product unless the retailer produced the product and sold it under a brand it owns, or the retailer’s failure to label was knowing and willful.

New York is uniquely poised to help provide important information to our families about the food we eat. I urge you to support GMO labeling legislation for the benefit of our environment, our constituents, and the public health of New York, Connecticut, and our country. Thank you.