Made in the USA

As the American diet is increasingly dominated by unlabeled GMOs, much of the world insists on labeling

By **Bill Giebler**

The Fourth of July celebrations of my 1970s childhood read like an all-American portrait: sparklers, yard games, sizzling burgers and hot dogs on the grill, corn on the cob, potato salad and Coca-Cola, all set to the slow, anticipatory churn of an ice cream maker.

For most Americans today, that menu would also include Genetically Modified Organisms (GMOs). That's because the vast majority of U.S. sweeteners, livestock feed and corn—among other foods—come from GM crops. The milk in the ice cream maker, too, would likely come from cows treated with the genetically engineered growth hormone rGBH.

In some ways, this makes the meal even more all-American. The U.S. is, after all, the single largest producer of GM crops, with as much acreage planted as the number two and three countries—Brazil and Argentina—combined. As a result, most of the processed foods we eat in the U.S. contain GMOs, with estimates ranging from 60 to over 80 percent. By contrast, many countries restrict or ban GMOs, and 64 countries—including 40 European nations, China, Russia and even Brazil—require labeling of GM foods.

Insufficient scientific consensus regarding the direct impacts of GMOs leaves consumers scratching their heads—with compelling arguments that GMOs are necessary for feeding a growing population countered by concerns that we don't know the long-term viability or impact of this "Frankenfoods" experiment. Indirect impacts are well known, however, as common crops are genetically modified to resist Monsanto's Roundup and similar herbicides, allowing for increased applications of herbicides containing glyphosate—a chemical the World Health Organization has declared a probable carcinogen. In April, the Organic Consumers Association (OCA) began a project to test for the presence of glyphosate in water supplies, urine and breast milk.

"For decades now, the public has been exposed to glyphosate," according to Ronnie Cummins, founder and director of the OCA, "despite mounting evidence that this key active ingredient is harmful to human health and the environment."

The lack of consensus is what has many demanding a slowing of the adoption of GMOs. "We're very concerned with the lack of environmental and health study," says Rebecca Spector of the Center for Food Safety. The problem, she says, is that the Food and Drug Administration simply audits company-provided data and doesn't require any specific testing. "This," she says, "is not a safety approval." On the production side, she continues, "we know these crops are having a negative [environmental] impact. Our government should be regulating them because of that."

Meanwhile, many consumers are simply asking for transparency. However, the right to know is taking form in the inverse. That is, some companies now voluntarily label products that do not contain GMOs, doing so at their own expense and rendering non-GMO a specialty category.

"The Non-GMO Project grew out of the natural and organic products industry looking for a way to assure customers their product did not contain GMOs," says Ken Ross of the Global ID Group, the first commercial lab to use DNA testing to detect GMOs, and the company behind the rigorous "Non-GMO Project Verified" seal.

"Organic certification is still a great way to avoid GMOs, and most organic products are GMO-free," Ross adds, since organic certification disallows GMOs. "With that said," he continues, noting that the USDA Organic program does not test for GMOs, "if you want the absolute best assurance of non-GM product, the combination of USDA Organic and Non-GMO Verified is certainly the highest level of assurance you can get."

But additional seals tend to confuse consumers, says Mary Ellen Kustin of the Environmental Working Group. Citing a 2014 *Consumer Reports* survey showing that 72 percent of consumers wish to avoid GMOs, she says, "More than half of consumers get it completely wrong." Indeed, 64 percent of those surveyed inaccurately believe "natural" on a label means GMO-free, while 25 percent underestimate organic labeling that does mean GMO-free. "I don't think adding the opportunity for another label is going to fix that," she said, speaking specifically about a congressional bill that would codify the voluntary labeling. Experts at the Organic Trade Association echoed the concern of confusion coming from multiple voluntary third party logos.

"We're very concerned with the lack of environmental and health study," says Rebecca Spector of the Center for Food Safety.

What NGOs, activists and concerned consumers across the board are asking for is labeling of the *presence* of GMOs.

Not everyone agrees on the labeling format, and labeling alone wouldn't address everyone's concerns, but it would bring us in line with most other developed nations. A recent Associated Press poll shows that two-thirds of Americans favor GMO labeling.

"It's an incredibly complex field—even to make the simplest conclusion of yields, for instance," says Ross. Recent data shows that GM crops no longer outperform their non-GMO relatives after a few growing seasons. "When it's all said and done, the one thing we do support is the right to know, at least being able to choose."