In Support of HB 5117, An Act Concerning Genetically-Engineered Foods
Submitted to the Connecticut General Assembly Environment Committee

By Analiese Paik, Fairfield, CT

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To Senator Meyer, Representative Roy, and Members of the Environment Committee:

My name is Analiese Paik and I live in Fairfield Connecticut with my husband and two children. For the past 3 years I have run the Fairfield Green Food Guide, a website dedicated to helping consumers find local and sustainably grown food in CT. I support local farms and food but I also support GMO labeling.

Consumers increasingly want to know where there food comes from and how it's grown. Food labeling provides us with that transparency, enabling informed choices at point of purchase. But when it comes to GMOs, we are shopping blind.

What is a GMO?

GMOs (or "genetically modified organisms") are organisms whose genetic characteristics are purposefully changed through genetic manipulation or modification. Through laboratory processes, DNA is extracted from one species of plant, animal, bacteria or virus and forced into another unrelated species of plant or animal to exactly confer a desired trait that would not occur in nature or be possible through traditional crossbreeding methods. In agricultural products the most common GMOs are engineered to tolerate herbicides or produce their own pesticides. Herbicide tolerant corn, soy, cotton, and canola are designed to withstand the application of one or more herbicides. GM cotton and corn varieties carrying a gene from the soil bacteria Bt can produce their own toxins, in every cell of the plant, to kill specific insects. Bt cotton and corn varieties are registered as pesticides (PIPs) with the Environmental Protection Agency which is responsible for their regulation. The USDA is responsible for regulating herbicide-tolerant (HT) crops.

How Prevalent Are GMOs in the Food Supply?

GMOs are ubiquitous in our food supply. Seventy percent of processed foods sold in grocery stores contained at least one GM ingredient according to a 2003 study commissioned by the California Department of Food and Agriculture (report attached). The US is the largest producer of GMO foods in the world with 69 million hectares under cultivation and a 43% market share. We also grow the widest variety of GM crops in the world including corn, cotton, soy, canola,

sugar beets, alfalfa, papaya and squash. When US manufacturers export these foods, they must segregate supply chains and comply with the labeling laws of other countries.

Why Aren't GMOs Labeled?

The FDA determined 20 years ago that GM foods need not be labeled because they were not "materially" different from their conventional counterparts. The seeds from which these foods grow, however, are unique enough to be patentable. The two appear to be contradictory.

Why Label?

Polls conducted by professional news organizations including the Washington Post, MSNBC and Reuters/NPR consistently show that over 90% of consumers want GM ingredients labeled**,** yet we are one of the only developed countries without GMO labeling laws (Canada is the other). Labeling of GMOs is required in all 15 nations in the European Union, Japan, Australia, Brazil, Russia and China and many other countries. Americans have no way of knowing whether the vegetable oils, sugars, breads, crackers, cookies, corn chips, snack bars or ice cream we're buying are made with GM ingredients. Currently the only product labels available to guide consumer purchases away from GMOs are USDA Certified Organic and Non-GMO Project verified. Our neighbors in NY and RI are trying to pass mandatory GMO labeling laws so we are not alone. Additionally federal legislation would be even more restrictive: The GE Food Right to Know Act, the GE Safety Act, and the GE Technology Farmer Protection Act

Why Aren't GMOs Safety Tested?

No independent scientific testing has been conducted on GMOs to show that they are safe for humans, animals and the environment. GMOs are materially different enough to be awarded patent protection, but are also deemed substantially equivalent to their natural counterparts by the FDA and therefore require no safety testing. Many of us believe that a plant capable of making its own pesticide, like Bt corn, is different enough from conventional corn that testing is warranted. Consumers have a right to know if there are GMO ingredients in their food, just as they have a right to know if there is sugar, soy, wheat, nuts, saturated fat, dairy, salt or other ingredients they have reasons to avoid.

The precautionary principle, which guides responsible science, states that if a policy could possibly harm human health or the environment, that policy must not be adopted until those proposing it prove that it is safe. Therefore, the burden of proof is on the FDA to prove that GMOs are safe. Absent that proof, we're asking for labeling so we can make an informed choice. Nobody said the labeling process would be simple, but that is not cause to avoid responsible labeling that would give consumers the transparency that over 90% of us have repeatedly said we want.

Benefits of Labeling GMOs

GMO labeling will help consumers to make informed choices about the foods they eat. It will also help many of our farmers growing conventional crops. When we direct purchases to only those foods labeled Certified Organic, Non-GMO Project Verified or GMO-free in an attempt to avoid GMOs, we miss conventionally grown foods. The current system hurts small farmers and food producers who are an important part of our local economy and integral to our food security. Some may argue that requiring GMO labeling will prohibitively increase costs for both manufacturers and consumers. Yet studies conducted in both the US and Canada demonstrate that the costs are reasonable and in countries where labeling is mandatory, no impact on consumers was seen.

Growing Concerns About GMOs

- Despite the promise that there would be a substantial reduction in herbicides used on herbicide resistant GM crops, hundreds of millions of more pounds are used annually.

  Impacts of Genetically Engineered Crops on Pesticide Use in the US: The First 13 Years. Extracts:

  This report explores the impact of the adoption of genetically engineered (GE) corn, soybean, and cotton on pesticide use in the United States, drawing principally on data from the United States Department of Agriculture. The most striking finding is that GE crops have been responsible for an increase of 383 million pounds of herbicide use in the U.S. over the first 13 years of commercial use of GE crops (1996-2008).

  This dramatic increase in the volume of herbicides applied swamps the decrease in insecticide use attributable to GE corn and cotton, making the overall chemical footprint of today's GE crops decidedly negative. The report identifies, and discusses in detail, the primary cause of the increase -- the emergence of herbicide-resistant weeds.

- Herbicide tolerant super weeds on GM monocultures have brought about the introduction of new defoliant-tolerant crops that are resistant to 2, 4-D, a prime component in Agent Orange that is known to cause reproductive problems, birth defects, and increased risk of cancer.

- Despite claims that Bt, the insecticide in GE corn, would not survive digestion, a Canadian study has found Bt toxin circulating in the bloodstream of both pregnant and non-pregnant women.

We deserve the right to choose whether or not to support technology that results in overuse of herbicides. We deserve the right to choose whether or not to support technology that depends on spraying toxic herbicides like 2, 4-D. We deserve the right to choose whether or not to support technology that uses toxins that survive digestion and may pose a health risk to humans. We deserve the right to choose not to eat transgenic crops that have not undergone independent safety testing.

We can only make informed choices if our food is labeled. Please label GMOs and restore our fundamental right to choose what we eat.

Sincerely,
Analiese Paik