

HB 6519

To the Connecticut Joint Committee on Public Health

The American Seed Trade Association (ASTA) is writing this message in opposition to HB 6519, which is currently pending before the Connecticut legislature, and scheduled to be heard by the Joint Committee on Public Health on Friday, March 15th. The bill primarily attempts to require the labeling of foods improved using biotechnology processes.

ASTA believes that the reasoning behind the proposed legislation is flawed in several material respects. The proposed labeling requirements are neither necessary nor scientifically defensible, and they run contrary to federal policy established by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA). As a result, it is ASTA's view that the bill would create competitive disincentives in Connecticut among different agricultural sectors and thereby increase the cost of doing business in the state to the ultimate detriment of Connecticut seed companies, dealers, customers, and consumers – with no advantages.

Founded in 1883, ASTA is one of the oldest trade organizations in the United States. Its membership consists of over 720 companies involved in seed production and distribution, plant breeding, and related industries. ASTA's membership is comprised primarily of U.S. companies, although it does have members from 15 other countries. ASTA advocates science and policy issues of importance to the seed industry. Its mission is to enhance the development of movement of seed worldwide.

ASTA is a diverse organization. It represents all types of seed companies and technologies – seed from alfalfa to zucchini, technologies from organic to biotechnology, and companies from “mom and pop” to multinationals. Among others, it has a standing committee on organic seed and a standing committee on biotechnology. ASTA has members in 47 states, including Connecticut. It works on behalf of all of its members at the state, national, and international levels. In other words, ASTA represents every seed company that would be affected by the proposed legislation, and it works in cooperation with the rest of agribusiness and consumers, whom the proposed legislation would also affect.

It is important to note that the FDA is the federal agency responsible for the safety and labeling of most human and animal foods and food ingredients sold in the United States. Since 1992, FDA has maintained that foods from plants improved through modern biotechnology are equivalent to and as safe as those from plants produced through conventional breeding. Therefore, they should be regulated in the same manner as any other foods. Moreover, in the United States, seeds are regulated under a comprehensive system of complementary Federal and state seed laws, and must satisfy customer and consumer expectations. Labeling is required by law, and by commercial necessity, to be accurate and contain appropriate information for growers. In the past 25 years, over two billion acres of biotechnology crops have been grown worldwide with no incidence of health or environmental harm.

In the case of modern biotechnology, FDA focuses on the final product and not the process that was used to produce the food product in determining how it should be labeled. Accordingly, FDA does not require labeling to indicate whether or not a food or food ingredient is produced through a biotechnology process. FDA, however, would require labeling of the product if the modification materially changed its

nutritional attributes, its safety, or other important characteristics. But, since modern biotechnology production methods have been found to be equivalent to and as safe as other developmental or production methods, such methods are not material information that must be included in labeling. Furthermore, FDA has asserted that such a statement as this bill requires on a food created using biotechnology may be misleading if it implies that the labeled food is superior to foods that are not so labeled. The U.S. government's position on "genetically modified organisms" reflects not only the benefits of the technology, but also a belief in science-based systems, strong and appropriate regulatory oversight, sensitivity to customer and consumer expectations, and a commitment to stewardship and cooperation throughout the food chain.

Lastly, it is important to note that the provisions of this bill will add significantly to the duties and responsibilities of the Connecticut Department of Consumer Protection. This will lead to added expense for enforcement. And, combined with the potential loss of business to the state, as out-of-state seed companies decline to take on the added burden of contracting with Connecticut growers under the new bill, it would have an adverse impact on state coffers during this difficult time. ASTA believes that this bill, if passed, would add more government bureaucracy and taxpayer costs, create new frivolous lawsuits, and increase food costs significantly — without providing any health or safety benefits

In summary, the use of seeds enhanced through modern biotechnology continues to grow around the world as a result of their economic, environmental, and human health benefits. Farmers' use of these seeds in Connecticut is no exception to this pattern of growth. In our view, HB 6519 as it is now drafted, raises several serious practical concerns and is unnecessary from a legal standpoint. Of significance, it would add unnecessarily to the cost of doing business in Connecticut and, therefore, penalize Connecticut farmers and consumers. Affecting seed companies large and small, including farmer dealers, HB 6519 would also reduce the size, offerings, and competitiveness of the seed industry in Connecticut compared to other states.

Accordingly, ASTA opposes HB 6519. Please do not hesitate to contact us if you have any questions. Thank you for your consideration.

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