

Public Health Committee

Hearing on H.B. 6519

Friday, March 15th, 2013

Testimony by Doug Sutherland

Chairwoman Gerrantana and Chairwoman Johnson, distinguished members of the committee, I want to thank you for holding this hearing on the important public health issues related to genetically modified organisms.

My name is Doug Sutherland. I live in Trumbull. I'm a member of the Trumbull DTC and a member of Democracy for America – Fairfield County and I'm also the co-producer of the DFA Public Access TV show, Stream of Conscience. I'm also an engineer by trade. I mention these things as a way of saying that I consider myself fairly active in the community and fairly well read when it comes to public policy issues affecting our state, our environment and our families. However, the issue of Genetically Modified Organisms in our food supply had largely flown under my radar until a friend of mine called me up a few months ago.

After discussing this issue with my friend, I began to do some research on the topic of GMOs. And what I found greatly concerned and dismayed me. I had a general idea what a GMO was, but I had no idea how prevalent they had become in our food supply and how casually they had been approved by the federal agency which is supposed to be charged with protecting that food supply – the FDA. What I discovered was another case of corporate power seemingly trumping good public policy and quite frankly good common sense. I was also stunned to discover that not only had GMOs infiltrated as much as 70% of the food we eat, but that this had been going on for the last 17 years with very little notice by the public. I do not think that last point is an accident.

Among the many revelations I had during my research was that many of the currently approved GMOs were not engineered to be more nutritious or more flavorful or more beneficial for the consumers, but that mostly they had been engineered to increase production – primarily by becoming more resistant to pests such as weeds and insects. And the methods that were used to accomplish this goal were to make the crops produce their own toxins or to make them resistant to the application of herbicides applied to kill weeds. Because most of these crops are intended to be consumed by humans or by farm animals that in turn produce food that will be consumed by humans, this entire concept raises many red flags. Are these new toxin producing crops safe for human consumption? Is the ingestion of

the herbicides now more liberally applied to these crops safe for human consumption?

Because so much is still unknown about genetics and about the human immune system, it seems obvious that introducing new genetically modified organisms into the nations food supply should be done with great care and with extensive long-term testing and with full disclosure to the public. However, in reading the history of GMOs in our food supply, it seems clear that neither great care nor extensive long-term testing has been done and a lack of full disclosure is an understatement.

Now the GMO issue that is primarily being addressed by H.B. 6519 is one of labeling. I would submit that labeling of food containing a new and potentially hazardous substance is the very least we should be demanding as a step towards protecting the health of consumers, our families and our children. Without labeling, American consumers are unsuspecting subjects in a grand, unmonitored scientific experiment – an experiment that could ultimately be catastrophic for human health and the environment.

Many groups have testified before the legislature claiming that GMOs are safe and that they have been more thoroughly tested than any type of food that came before them. I feel that these statements are highly suspect. Since the FDA does not itself generally carry out any testing of it's own, the wide majority of testing that has been done on GMOs has come from the manufacturers themselves. Much as the research provided by the tobacco industry for decades turned out to be biased and filled with lies, I think relying on an industry that stands to make billions of dollars off the sale of GMOs to provide objective and unbiased information about the safety of their product is pure folly. What is needed is truly independent testing of GMOs by a wide group of scientists not only to prove the safety to human health, but also to ensure that GMOs do not pose any unintended consequences to our environment. Such research is not easy and it needs to be conducted over a long period of time in order to pick up small and possibly cumulative effects on the health of the population and the environment.

Because the courts have ruled that corporations may patent genetically engineered organisms, biotech firms like Monsanto, DuPont and Syngenta own exclusive rights to the seeds for these new organisms. In general, buyers of their seeds have to sign agreements not to use the seeds for research and so independent scientific analysis of these new GMOs has been effectively shut down or tightly regulated. This type of controlled environment does not lend itself to reliable scientific research. In fact, many scientists that have raised concerns about the safety of GMOs have found their livelihood threatened by these powerful corporations that

often fund many of the so called independent research labs at universities and organizations around the world. These are very troubling facts indeed.

Aside from the safety issues associate with consuming genetically modified foods, there are major concerns about the practical benefits of many of these new organisms. Some GMOs may contain real and significant benefits to consumers like GM rice that holds the potential to provide Vitamin A to the third world where malnutrition brings blindness to thousands of people each year. However, many of the currently available GMO crops in the US appear to provide little in the way of benefits to the consumer while holding the potential of great harm to human health, the environment and the diversity of our food supply.

Most GM crops cultivated in the US today have one of two genetically produced characteristics which manufacturers tout as beneficial. The first are know as Bt crops which have had genetic material from the *Bacillus thuringiensis* bacterium inserted into the genome of the plant which in turn produces proteins that are toxic to insect pests. The second major type of GMOs are what are known as Roundup Ready crops. These crops have been genetically modified to be resistant to the broad-spectrum herbicide glyphosate, otherwise known as Roundup. These crops can be sprayed with Roundup that will kill the weeds, but leave the GMO crop unaffected. Bt crops such as corn and cotton and Roundup Ready crops such as soybeans, canola, cotton, corn and alfalfa are in widespread production today.

Both of these types of GMO crops appear to be failing to produce the touted results the biotech industry has claimed. There is evidence that insects are adapting and becoming more resistant to the toxins in Bt crops while at the same time, there are concerns about the safety for humans consuming Bt toxins in produce like corn. Weeds also appear to be adapting to the herbicide Roundup and so the biotech industry is looking to produce crops resistant to even more toxic herbicides than glyphosate. At the same time, there are concerns about the safety of human consumption of herbicide residue. A recent study by the Center for Sustaining Agriculture and Natural Resources at Washington State University (<http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/10/02/us-usa-study-pesticides-idUSBRE89100X20121002>) appears to show that the use of dangerous pesticides and herbicides is going up, not down, in the US. This calls into question the entire justification for GMOs in the first place.

At the same time, many in the scientific community are expressing serious concerns about collateral damage from GMO crops. Just this week, an article in the New York Times (<http://ow.ly/j0fxe>) raised alarm bells about the decrease in size of the migration of the monarch butterfly. One possible cause put forth is the

increased use of Roundup that has reduced the availability of the milkweed plant – a critical source of the butterflies’ food supply.

Finally, the unprecedented power and influence of large chemical and biotech firms has concentrated control of much of the world’s seed supply in the hands of a very few. Three companies (Monsanto, Dupont and Syngenta) now control over 50% of the world’s seeds. And just a handful of large corporations influence the direction of agricultural research worldwide. This goes against the long history of innovation and diversity coming from a large and wide-ranging number of sources all across the globe. This could put the world’s food supply in jeopardy. A recent report from the ETC Group spells out the dangers of the current state of biotech power over the world’s food supply (*The Big Six: A Profile of Corporate Power in Seeds, Agrochemicals & Biotech* by Hope Shand).

With all these concerns about the safety of these organisms, their effect on our environment and the ultimate benefit of their use to society (or lack thereof), it seems more than reasonable that consumers should have access to information telling them which foods contain GMOs. The FDA requires juice manufacturers to label their juice if it is made from concentrate and yet no label is required for such a controversial process as that used to produce genetically modified foods. It would be much better if GMO labeling were a requirement at the federal level, but since that is not happening, it is incumbent on the states to protect their citizens by providing consumers with the information they need to make intelligent choices about the food they buy.

For these reasons, I would strongly urge the members of this committee to bring this bill forward with a strong recommendation that the full House and Senate pass H.B. 6519 and send a strong signal to food manufacturers across the nation that in Connecticut we stand up and defend the health and safety of our children.

Thank you.

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