

**Testimony Presented to the  
Committee on Children of the Connecticut General Assembly**

**Tuesday, February 24, 2015**

**Paul R. Pescatello, JD, PhD**

**H.B. No. 6798  
An Act Requiring Labeling of Baby Food and Infant Formula  
Containing Genetically Engineered Organisms**

Good afternoon Senator Bartolomeo, Representative Urban, Senator Bye, Representative Hampton, Senator Martin, Representative Kokoruda, members of the Committee on Children.

I'm Paul Pescatello, here today in my capacity as Chair of the Connecticut Bioscience Growth Council and to represent the Biotechnology Industry Organization—BIO—the national biotech association.

I am also President/CEO of the New England Biotechnology Association and Chair of We Work for Health Connecticut.

The Connecticut Bioscience Growth Council is a committee of the Connecticut Business and Industry Association's biotech and biopharma members.

The Bioscience Growth Council was formed as a means to foster collaboration both among Connecticut biotech and biopharma companies themselves and, just as importantly, *with* our state. As you know, Connecticut – *this* General Assembly – has chosen wisely to invest in the life sciences as a foundation for Connecticut's 21<sup>st</sup> century economy and as a means to create a broad spectrum of jobs.

The strides we have made in regenerative medicine and stem cell research, and the research and economic development already being accomplished by Jackson Labs, names only a few of the dividends generated by this Connecticut investment.

BIO is the world's largest trade association representing biotechnology companies, academic institutions, state biotechnology centers and related organizations across the United States and in more than 30 other nations. BIO members are involved in the research and development of innovative healthcare, agricultural, industrial and environmental biotechnology products.

I am here to speak in opposition to House Bill No. 6798, An Act Requiring Labeling of Baby Food and Infant Formula Containing Genetically Engineered Organisms.

There are four sets of issues that are useful to frame the analysis of HB 6798: the law, the science, our reputation and social justice.

First, the law. Two years ago, after much debate and deliberation the General Assembly passed legislation that mandates the labeling of food, including baby food and infant formula, that contains GM ingredients when four states enact similar legislation. GM, of course, stands for “genetically modified” —a better term would be “biotech” to describe foods produced with the aid of biotechnology.

The deliberation and democracy evident in the process in the spring of 2013 that produced the Connecticut labeling law is something of which we can be quite proud. We should not devalue that process, that legislation, that consensus, by reopening the labeling issue through HB 6798. At a minimum, if this new legislation were to pass, it would be subject to litigation as a result of existing Connecticut labeling law.

Another matter of law worth underscoring is the U.S. Department of Agriculture regulations governing the “organic” label. These USDA rules define “organic” as *not* containing GM ingredients. If a consumer wishes to avoid GM foods, including baby foods and infant formula, such foods are available and clearly identified through the organic label.

I would note too that infant formula is among the most highly regulated foods in the world. The US Food and Drug Administration has concluded that all genetically-engineered ingredients currently used in foods, including infant formulas, are safe and the same in composition, nutritional value and quality as ingredients not derived through biotechnology.

Finally, it should not be overlooked that labeling laws will increase food costs—the actual labeling itself, but also all the rules, regulations, investigations and personnel that would be part of labeling enforcement.

And labeling by one state, of a subset of foods, such as baby food and infant formula, weighs down Connecticut commerce with a Connecticut-specific cost. If labeling were deemed to have value—which, as you will hear in the remainder of my testimony, we believe it does not hold—a federal, 50-state, approach makes a lot more common sense.

Now, from law to the science. You may be aware of the recent Pew Research Center opinion survey which found 88% of scientists view GM foods as safe to eat. This 88% is greater than the proportion of scientists who believe climate change is mostly due to human activity.

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration has consistently held that “...there is no significant difference between foods produced using bio-engineering, as a class, and their conventional counterparts.”

The American Medical Association stated in June 2012: “There is no scientific justification for special labeling of bioengineered foods ...and *voluntary* labeling is *without value* unless accompanied by focused consumer education (emphasis added).”

The American Association for the Advancement of Sciences stated in October 2012: “The FDA does not require labeling of a food based on the specific genetic modification procedure used in the development of its input crops. Legally mandating such a label can only serve to mislead and falsely alarm consumers.”

Why the scientific consensus favoring GM/biotech foods and opposing labeling? Foods containing biotech ingredients are compositionally the same as conventionally produced foods.

In a sense, this is the crux of the argument against GM labeling. There is a disconnect to it—affixing a Scarlet Letter to imply a substantive difference between GM and non-GM foods when no such difference exists. There would be a substantive price to pay, however: scaring consumers away from GM foods, causing them to spend more on groceries than they need to.

Farmers have been genetically modifying crops for thousands of years. Use of biotechnology in plant science is a means to speed and, in fact, make safer traditional cross-breeding.

Consider this: when plants are crossbred for a particular trait the “old-fashioned way,” say a peanut plant for drought tolerance, the trait may be produced but in the process many other things may be altered. For example, unforeseen allergens may be created.

Biotechnology is much more precise. Rather than mixing and matching an entire plant genome, only the single gene or very small number of genes for a particular trait are targeted.

There is so much science demonstrating the safety and value of biotechnology applied to food crops. I would be happy to supply you with any studies you may wish to review.

Now, a comment about our reputation. Perhaps the most important reason for our opposition to HB6798 is that it undermines the foundation, the hospitable environment, for biotech we—you, in this General Assembly—have worked so hard to build in Connecticut.

As we—you—did so astutely with stem cell and then regenerative medicine research, we looked beyond the confusion, the urban legends, the anti-science rhetoric, that our opponents sought to create and crafted legislation that broadcast to the world Connecticut’s openness to science, rational analysis and the high technology job opportunities of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

We were open for research and open for business. There was, we said, no fear to be had that labs or businesses would be weighted down with policy debates the scientific community long ago put to rest.

Connecticut is a high cost state but one with much high value added intellectual property to sell to the world. The high living standards we enjoy in Connecticut depend on our creating more of that intellectual property. We must continue to be confidently known as hospital to science and rational analysis. HB 6798 would be utterly counter to that message.

Finally, there is an important social justice issue to consider.

Biotechnology as it is applied to food production is part of a centuries-long continuum of using science—from monks employing Mendelian genetics to Nobel Laureate Norman Borlaug’s post-World War II “green revolution.” The science of food production has allowed us to feed the hungry and free most of us from the need to farm—allowing us to use our time, talents and treasure for other pursuits.

It would be a shame if some of us non-farmers in the First World, willing and able to reduce the supply of food and pay more for it, mostly to assuage our romanticized notions of what constitutes proper farming, caused food costs to rise for everyone. Higher food costs means fewer resources for education, housing, healthcare, transportation. Should we really incur such a price and impose it on the developing world—as well as those struggling economically in our own state and country—when the science to justify it doesn’t exist?

I’ll close my testimony with a comment about the cacophony of voices opposed to GM/biotech foods.

You have and will hear a great deal from these advocates. All I will say here is to ask you to review carefully the science proving the safety and value of biotech foods and, as importantly, to review carefully the studies and arguments put forth by opponents of biotech foods. Who are these studies’ authors? Is their expertise in science, biotechnology, food science? Are the conclusions and facts and data and analysis found in and cited by highly regarded journals of science? Are the studies reviewed, so to speak, by the choir, or impartially peer reviewed?

We should be mindful not to allow a false equivalency narrative to develop—that there’s science of equal weight on both sides of the GM issue. That is simply far, far from the case. In the recent outbreak of measles, resulting from misinformation about vaccine safety, we have seen the distortions and harm that occurs when such a false equivalency myth takes hold.

The science is overwhelmingly supportive of the value and safety of GM foods.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak before you today. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have or expand on any points I’ve made.