

Forbes



Forbes Leadership Forum Contributor

News, Commentary, and Advice About Leadership

Opinions expressed by Forbes Contributors are their own.

LEADERSHIP 11/07/2014 @ 11:00AM

GMO Labeling: How to End the Fight

[+ Comment Now](#) [+ Follow Comments](#)

This article is by [Ned Potter](#), a senior vice president at the communications firm [Finsbury](#) and a former science correspondent for ABC News and [CBS News](#).

The biotechnology companies that make the [genetically modified organisms](#) in our food have been fighting a pitched battle against mandatory labeling of their products. But even when they have won at the ballot box, they've really lost.

Referendums in Colorado and Oregon, which would have mandated that foods with GMOs in them be so labeled on store shelves, were both defeated on Election Day, though the Oregon race was tight. The Hawaiian island of Maui narrowly passed a moratorium on the planting of genetically modified crops.

In each case, GMO manufacturers and their allies vastly outspent their opponents – by about \$20 million to \$8 million in Oregon, and \$16.7 million to \$900,000 in Colorado, according to figures reported in each state. On Maui companies opposed to the moratorium were reported to have spent \$8 million, 87 times what advocates of the ban did.

To big companies, those aren't big numbers, but the cost in good will may be far greater. More than half the states have at least considered measures this year that would mandate GMO labeling. Vermont this spring passed a law mandating GMO labeling on store shelves by 2016, and other states have passed bills saying they will follow – if Vermont's law survives legal challenges from the GMO makers.

“Vermonters have spoken loud and clear,” said [Gov. Peter Shumlin](#), a Democrat, when he signed the bill. “They want to know what’s in their food.”

How could anyone be against such openness? The GMO makers say they have serious concerns. For starters, they worry there could be a patchwork of different laws around the country, driving up the cost of food as manufacturers scramble to determine what products need what labels. They say they have seen bureaucracy before, are familiar with its tendency to grow,

and argue that a viable alternative is already in place: non-GM foods can be labeled “certified organic.”

But their biggest fear is probably fear itself; businesses say the GMO issue is so emotionally charged that consumers will be scared away even by blandly worded labels.

There may be a more constructive approach:

Makers and defenders of GMOs might do well to embrace the transparency that looks like such a threat to them, and ramp up their efforts to explain what genetically modified foods are all about.

To begin with, GMOs so far appear to be healthy for human consumption. “Indeed, the science is quite clear,” said the Board of Directors of the [American Association for the Advancement of Science](#) in 2012: “crop improvement by the modern molecular techniques of biotechnology is safe.” The data behind that are extensive; genetically modified food has been on American tables for three decades, in large volume. The [Department of Agriculture](#) says GMOs are in at least 93 percent of the nation’s corn and 94 percent of its soybeans. If there has been actual harm to people, science has not found it.

Proponents also argue that GMOs can increase crop yields for a hungry world; reduce, in some cases, the use of pesticides; and help keep the cost of food under control, since more durable crops mean greater supply and lower maintenance.

But no matter what facts the industry may think it has on its side, the debate will mostly remain emotional. We have seen it time and again (think of debates over climate change policy or gun control). Many people have strong feelings about the issue, and when presented with contradictory information, they often dig in instead of responding.

So any advocacy will only work if it is respectful and truly open. People have questions about GMOs and their effect on the environment, and makers will hurt themselves if they appear to have anything to hide. It may be much more effective if they can show they are honest brokers.

It is important for them not to pretend they have all the answers. It might be good to back up their information effort with a robust research program, funded by industry but run by an independent third party, to study the impact of GMOs. That outside agency (perhaps a university) could also offer perspective on research with which it is not involved. If a research paper casts doubt on GMO safety, the industry needs to acknowledge it. It is in its interest to help clear the air.

Mitch Markel, a partner at the Benenson Strategy Group in New York, has done market research on genetically modified organisms, and said he has found widespread distrust of them – coupled with widespread ignorance about them. The more people know about GMOs, he said, the more comfortable they are with them.

“Most people claim that they’re familiar,” he said in an interview. “They think that they know what it is, but the reality is that they don’t.”

Genetically modified organisms, then, may have more of a communications problem than a scientific one. A more open and more sophisticated communications approach is in order. The world is hungry for honest discussion, and it may be very welcome.
