

What Should Consumers Know about the Foods they are Consuming?

Wunderlich S*

Montclair State University, Montclair, NJ, USA

*Corresponding author: Wunderlich S, Montclair State University, Montclair, NJ, USA, Tel: 973-655-4373; E-mail: wunderlichs@mail.montclair.edu

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Editorial

Consumers are becoming more and more interested in knowing not only what is in the foods they are purchasing and consuming, but also how they were produced. One way to help consumers to understand this is by providing labels on the food items which are easy to interpret and also list all ingredients in the foods. Today, however, many consumers are asking for more information about these ingredients, including how they were produced and whether they are organic or were produced by genetically modified organisms (GMO or GM) [1].

The food labels are supposed to be disclosing and guiding the consumer about the ingredients and nutritional values of food. The food labeling policies have been evolving and have become more complex since 1892 when President Lincoln founded the two main Federal Departments involved in food labeling, namely the Department of Agriculture (USDA) and the Bureau of Chemistry which later became the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), the two Federal agencies responsible for food label policy and food safety [2-4].

The most recent food labeling policy is the labeling of the food produced from Genetically Modified Organism (GMO) seeds. The GMO food production system uses biotechnologically altered seeds to produce certain characteristics such as higher nutrient content, resistance to certain plant diseases and pests, etc. While there are not enough scientific data and findings to conclusively demonstrate either the benefits or harmful effects of these products on people's health and/or the environment, the issue of GMO foods has become controversial. Maybe there are no harmful effects or problems or perhaps there are some long term issues. We do not know fully as the GMO products are fairly new to the food markets and complete assessment of their health and environmental impact may take some time. Nevertheless, consumers may feel that they have the right to know if there are GMO products in their food. There have been tremendous efforts by some consumer-led organizations with some success to label the products that do not have GMO products as "Non-GMO Project Verified". The "Non-GMO Project VERIFIED" seal is placed on products that undergo voluntary testing and contain no more than 0.9% GMO ingredients. There have been also some efforts

in labeling the food with GMO products in states like Vermont. Most recently, this year (2016) President Obama signed a new law that mandates that the Department of Agriculture define what constitutes a GM food ingredient and then requires food industries to label any food that contain these ingredients. The law will require food packages to have a text label, a symbol or an electronic code, readable by smartphone, to disclose if the food contains GMOs. This is a huge program as almost 80% of foods in the US market contain genetically modified ingredients, primarily those containing corn and soybean products. If the USDA chooses a food labeling format such a product bar code which is only readable through smartphones, then it will be more difficult for some consumers without smartphones to learn about the ingredients in their foods.

Almost 90% of corn, soybeans and cotton grown in the United States are produced from genetically modified seeds (GMO). Since so many foods contain high-fructose corn syrup, corn-starch or soybean oil products, GMO labeling will be a tremendous task and have broad impact on food growers, food industries and consumers among others. GMO food production is a system that often includes the use of herbicide resistant seeds and extensive use of specific herbicides to kill all plants and weeds except the GMO crop. It is these herbicides that raise some concerns among the consumers, environmentalists, and conservationists [5].

It is clear that the long term impact of the GMO foods on people's health and environment needs to be investigated further. In the meantime, the new Federal food labeling policy should help consumers to make informed decisions about the foods they are purchasing and consuming.

References

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