GMO Labels Won't Make Foods Safer, Only More Expensive

By Richard Williams

- The writer is addressing the question, "Should the Federal Drug Administration require special labeling of genetically modified foods?"

It's been estimated that 70 to 80 percent of foods eaten in the United States contain ingredients that have been genetically modified.

But labeling these foods is certainly not a food safety issue; there has never been a case of harm to people from GM products—ever. And it's also not something that the FDA can legally do right now, because there is no scientific difference between GM foods and conventional foods.

By the year 2025, the World Wildlife Fund estimates that two thirds of the world's population will confront a water shortage and ecosystems will also suffer.

One way to help mitigate this scenario is to promote the use of GM foods, which reduces the need for ploughing. This allows the soil to trap moisture and helps plants retain water.

In some cases, this will make the difference between a harvest or crop failure. Some results show crop yields increasing by 4 to 8 percent in arid conditions with others suggesting gains as much as 21 percent.

With nearly one person in every nine not having enough to eat on this planet, that's a promising start.

Another way that GM foods help us is that they use less pesticide. One study found that it reduced the quantity of pesticides by 37 percent and the cost by 39 percent. Although pesticides get a bad rap, the truth is that the trace amounts of pesticides that you find in the average diet are totally safe.

As one toxicologist put it, there are more carcinogens in a single cup of coffee than there are in all of the pesticide residue you consume in a year. And that doesn't mean that coffee will give you cancer, it means human exposure to pesticides is extremely low.

An increase in yield and a decrease in pesticide costs will lower the price of foods, and that's a good thing, particularly if you're not well off.

It's amazing that, after 20 years of GM crops, there is still controversy. In fact, manipulation of food genes is just an extension of natural plant breeding that began somewhere between 8,000 and 10,000 years ago where farmers chose the best plants to retain for planting in the following year.

Modern-day corn, for example is the result of genetically modified plantings from thousands of years ago. Within the last few hundred years, farmers began artificially mating or cross-pollinating plants to increase yields. GM foods are a scientific extension of this process, and modern technology allows the process to be done to greater effect and with more specificity.

That means we can produce crops with better keeping and processing qualities, reduce spoilage due to mold, reduce allergens in food and, ultimately, grow drugs in foods.

We have already seen that Golden Rice, a GM food that contains beta carotene (Vitamin A) helps to reduce blindness and prevent up to two million deaths annually in third-world countries.

The creators received a Patent for Humanity Award this year and received a blessing from Pope Francis in 2013.

Labeling GM products would be expensive and potentially counterproductive by discouraging innovation in this necessary technology.

While labels may seem like a non-invasive way to share information, the costs on manufacturers will lead to higher food prices, and many people simply cannot afford that.
For those who wish to buy non-GM foods, there is the option to buy organic. However, it's important to keep in mind if you buy organic, you are actually putting yourself more at risk.

Organic foods are four to eight times more likely to be recalled for microbial contamination. And for that, you are paying a lot more.

ABOUT THE WRITER

Richard Williams is vice president for policy research and director of the Regulatory Studies Program at George Mason University's Mercatus Center. A former director for social sciences at the Center for Food Safety and Applied Nutrition in the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA), he holds a PhD in economics from Virginia Tech University. Readers may write him at Mercatus Center at GMU, 3434 Washington Blvd, 4th Floor, Arlington, VA 22201

This essay is available to Tribune News Service subscribers. Tribune did not subsidize the writing of this column; the opinions are those of the writer and do not necessarily represent the views of Tribune or its editors.

Citation:

You can copy and paste this information into your own documents.

