

SUNDAY FEATURES

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Slightly modified organics

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The Non-GMO Project aims to back up food makers' claims that their products are largely free of biotech ingredients

Alarmed that genetically engineered crops may be finding their way into organic and natural foods, an industry group in the US has begun a campaign to test products and label those that are largely free of biotech ingredients.

With farmers using gene-altered seeds to grow much of North America's corn, soybeans, canola and sugar, ingredients derived from biotech crops have become hard for food companies to avoid. But many makers of organic and natural foods are convinced that their credibility in the marketplace requires them to do so.

The industry group, the Non-GMO Project, says its new label is aimed at reassuring consumers and will be backed by rigorous testing.

"There's a vulnerability here that the industry is addressing," said Michael Potter, the founder and president of Eden Foods and a board member of the Non-GMO Project, the group responsible for the testing and labeling campaign. The initials GMO stand for genetically modified organism.

As plantings of conventional crops with genetic modifications soared in recent years, Potter put in place stringent safeguards to ensure that the organic soybeans he bought for tofu, soy milk and other products did not come from genetically engineered plants. He even supplies the seed that farmers use to grow his soybeans.

But many other companies have not been so careful, and as a result, Potter said, the organic and natural foods industry is like "a dirty room" in need of cleaning.

"What I've heard, what I know, what I've seen, what's been tested and the test results that have been shared with me, clearly indicate that the room is very dirty," Potter said.

Hundreds of products already claim on their packaging that they do not contain genetically modified ingredients, but with little consistency in the labeling and little assurance the products have actually been tested. The new labeling campaign hopes to clear up such confusion.

Participants in the Non-GMO Project include major players in the organic and natural foods business, like Whole Foods Market.

Whole Foods plans to place the project's seal on hundreds of products it markets under its "365" store brand. Nature's Path, a leading manufacturer of organic packaged foods like cereals, frozen waffles and granola bars, has also embraced the initiative.



The project's seal, a butterfly perched on two blades of grass in the form of a check mark, will begin appearing on packaged foods this fall. The project will not try to guarantee that foods are entirely free of genetically modified ingredients, but that manufacturers have followed procedures, including testing, to ensure that key ingredients contain no more than 0.9 percent of biotech material. That is the same threshold used in Europe, where labeling is required if products contain higher levels.

Dag Falck, a project board member who is the organic program manager of Nature's Path, said that testing and labeling were needed to protect the industry from the steady spread of biotech ingredients. His company has been testing for such ingredients for several years and is strengthening those measures.

LOSING FAITH

"The thing is, if we have a contamination problem that's growing in organics, what will happen one day when someone tests something and finds out that organics is contaminated beyond a reasonable amount, say 5 or 10 percent?" Falck said. "Consumers would lose all faith in organics."

While a consensus has developed among scientists that the genetically modified crops now in cultivation are safe, many biotech opponents say that questions remain over whether such crops pose health risks and whether the crops, and agricultural practices associated with them, could damage the environment.

The genetic modifications used in major crops in the US largely involve traits beneficial to farmers. Some make

the plants resistant to insects while others allow them to tolerate sprayings of a common herbicide used to combat weeds.

Plantings of crops with genetic modifications have risen sharply over the last decade, to the point that about 85 percent of corn and canola and 91 percent of soybean acreage this year was sown with biotech seed. Few food products in the supermarket lack at least some element derived from these crops, including oils, corn syrup, corn starch and soy lecithin.

The most recent agricultural sector to convert is sugar beets. Once this year's crop is processed, close to half of the nation's sugar will come from gene-engineered plants. Monsanto, a major developer of such seeds, has said it plans to develop biotech wheat, and scientists are moving forward on other crops.

Farmers who want to plant without using biotechnology are often surrounded by neighbors whose fields are sown with genetically modified crops. And manufacturers who want to avoid genetically engineered crops and their byproducts find that increasingly difficult to do.

Pollen from a biotech field may be carried by wind or insects to fertilize plants in a nonbiotech plot. At harvest and afterward, biotech and nonbiotech crops and their byproducts are often handled using the same farm equipment, trucks and so on. If the equipment is not properly cleaned, the two types of foodstuffs can mix.

While federal organic regulations bar farmers from planting genetically engineered seed, they are silent on what should be done about issues like pollination from nearby biotech crops.



Above: A technician processes DNA for a test of biotech crops in Fairfield, Iowa.

Left: With the proliferation of gene-altered seeds in North America, ingredients derived from biotech crops have become hard for food companies to avoid.

PHOTOS: NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE AND BLOOMBERG



Top: The US Center for Food Safety's Pocket Shoppers Guide to Genetically Engineered Food.

Above: The initials GMO stand for genetically modified organism. Participants in the Non-GMO Project include major players in the organic and natural foods business, like Whole Foods Market.

PHOTOS: NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE



Few regulations govern foods labeled "natural," but retailers say consumers of those products want them to be free of genetically engineered ingredients.

"There's some GMO presence in almost everything today," said Lynn Clarkson, president of Clarkson Grain Company, in Cerro Gordo, Illinois, which specializes in handling nonbiotech corn and soybeans.

Clarkson tests every truckload that farmers bring him, rejecting 5 to 7 percent of corn and soybean loads because they contain more than 0.9 percent of genetically modified material.

The Non-GMO project works with companies to test their ingredients and improve manufacturing processes. It will also do spot tests of products on store shelves.

Officials with the project would not provide details of the test results conducted so far under the program.

EARLY DAYS

Sandra Kepler, the chief executive of Food Chain Global Advisors, a consulting company that administers the project, said it was too early to draw conclusions and that much of the testing had been done on ingredients used by companies with safeguards already in place.

The executives of several companies participating in the project, including Eden and Nature's Path, said their products had come up clean in the tests. But several executives also said they were aware of positive tests for other companies, which they would not identify.

"People are going to be reluctant to say, 'My brand of cereal, we found some contaminated products and we changed sources,'" said Michael Funk, a project board member who is co-founder and chairman of

United Natural Foods, a major distributor. "Nobody wants to have that information out there." He said, however, that he believed the number of cases was small.

Labeling of food products for biotech content, or lack of it, has long been controversial. The biotechnology industry fought off early efforts to require labeling of genetically modified foods. Then, when some natural foods makers began using labels saying they were free of biotech ingredients, the Food and Drug Administration criticized the labels as potentially misleading. Labeling remains a gray area, with a host of products continuing to make such claims.

Supporters of the biotech industry questioned whether the new labeling campaign would pass muster with the FDA. "It's very important that the labels on those products are used for marketing and branding purposes and not to make statements about food safety," said Karen Batra, a director of communications of the Biotechnology Industry Organization, a lobbying group.

The FDA said it did not have authority to approve labels before they appeared in the marketplace. Once a label is in use, the agency could initiate a review if it received consumer complaints or had concerns the label was misleading.