

# Canadians want GM foods labelled, poll finds

By **STEVEN CHASE**

OTTAWA -- Nearly nine out of 10 Canadians want Ottawa to force companies to disclose whether any food they sell contains genetically modified ingredients, a new poll suggests.

The survey results show Ottawa, which has refused to make labelling of genetically engineered foods mandatory, is out of step with Canadians, says the Consumers Association of Canada, which paid Decima Research to conduct the poll.

Ottawa has resisted an international trend toward mandatory labelling, preferring to leave it to the industry to try to come up with a voluntary system -- an initiative that's been under way for four years.

"It's very rare to get Canadians to overwhelmingly agree on a single issue, but . . . [this] is such an issue," said Peggy Kirkeby, a vice-president at the consumers association.

"It is clear that consumers simply don't trust the food industry to voluntarily provide the necessary information."

She called on incoming prime minister Paul Martin to reverse Ottawa's stand on the issue.

The Decima poll surveyed 2,000 Canadians in the second half of October. It found that 88 per cent of those surveyed supported mandatory labelling of genetically modified food. Nine per cent said such disclosure should be voluntary.

Ottawa already forces food companies to disclose, in labelling, how much fat, salt, cholesterol and carbohydrates their products contain, Ms. Kirkeby said. She said the rules shouldn't be any different for genetically engineered foods.

Donald Boulanger, spokesman for Agriculture Minister Lyle Vanclief, said Ottawa doesn't force companies to declare whether food contains genetically modified organisms because the Canadian government thinks engineered products such as this are safe.

"According to Health Canada, GMOs do not pose a risk to humans or health," Mr. Boulanger said.

He said Ottawa trusts that companies will respond to GMO concerns by voluntarily labelling foods that have been genetically modified. "They will make sure to label their products as GMO-free if this is what consumers want," Mr. Boulanger said.

But Ms. Kirkeby said what's at issue is the consumer's right to know, not the science. "The consumers want this information and they have a right to this information," she said.

Canada is the third-largest producer of genetically modified crops, such as canola, and Ottawa is a major cheerleader for genetically engineered foods. Trade Minister Pierre Pettigrew even launched a challenge at the World Trade Organization, along with the United States, to pry open European markets for these products.

But federal bureaucrats have warned the government this year that growing consumer anxiety over genetically engineered foods threatens to sideswipe Canada's multibillion-dollar agri-food industry.

"Consumers are becoming more worried that they can't distinguish between GE [genetically engineered] and non-GE products," a briefing paper prepared for the Department of Agriculture and Agri-Food warned Ottawa in a memo in March, 2003.

"These concerns could precipitate a loss of confidence in the integrity of the Canadian food system, which could be very disruptive to the domestic system as well as Canada's ability to export to demanding markets."

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## **Poll shows huge support for GMO labelling**

By OLIVER MOORE

An overwhelming majority of Canadians thinks that the government has provided insufficient information about genetically modified organisms (GMO) in food and believes that all foods containing GMOs should be labelled as such.

The Consumers' Association of Canada released a study Wednesday which indicates the depth of distrust Canadians have for GMO foods, which have become increasingly common over the last decade.

"Mandatory labels on food products tell consumers how much salt, fat, cholesterol and carbohydrates are in a particular product," said Peggy Kirkeby, vice-president of issues and policy at the Consumers' Association. "Yet, when it comes to genetically modified ingredients, the federal government has said 'no, they aren't going to give this information to Canadian consumers'."

The poll - which was conducted by Decima research and surveyed 2,000 people in October of this year - found that 91 per cent of Canadians wanted labels listing GMO content and that 88 per cent think such labels should be made mandatory. Support for labelling was found to cross differences of income, gender, region or education.

"It is very rare to get Canadians to overwhelmingly agree on a single issue, but the mandatory labelling of genetically modified foods is such an issue," Ms. Kirkeby said. "There is no doubt that Canadians want information about what is in their food. . Consumers simply just don't trust the food industry

to voluntarily provide the necessary information."

In Canada - where extensive consultations have been held by the Canadian General Standards Board, the Canadian Council of Grocery Distributors and other interested groups - industry advocates are firm that GMO products pose no danger and that mandatory labelling would pose an onerous burden.

About 70 per cent of processed foods contain GMOs, major crops that come from genetically altered seed are corn, soybeans and canola. Some of these products are labelled by the food industry, which currently operates under a voluntary disclosure system.

Ms. Kirkeby said that the issue cuts across partisan lines, noting that members from four of the five major federal parties have proposed private member's bills mandating labelling of GMO food.

"There will be a new prime minister and Liberal government next week and Canadians are looking forward to fresh ideas," she said. "On behalf of Canadian consumers the Consumers' Association will be formally asking the new government to introduce legislation to mandate labelling of genetically modified foods."

A government advisory panel in the summer of 2002 issued a report recommending that voluntary labelling be used for the next five years and called for:

- ❖ Ottawa to designate someone to oversee government communication about GM foods;
- ❖ federal regulators be more accountable;
- ❖ long-term research be conducted into GM and other "novel organisms" in the food chain;
- ❖ research into the environmental impact of GM crops be examined;
- ❖ research into long-term health effects related to the consumption of specific foods, including GM foods;
- ❖ creation of a committee composed of industry and non-government organizers to discuss GM foods.

Dozens of foreign governments have adopted labelling regulations that mandate disclosure of nutritional or compositional changes, though they tend to exempt highly processed foods like cooking oils, starches and sugars. As yet, no government insists that foodstuffs from animals raised on feed including GMOs be labelled.

## **Consumers want mandatory labelling of genetically modified foods**

CALGARY - "Consumers have the right to know what's in their food and they overwhelmingly want the Federal Government to mandate labelling of genetically modified foods," said Mr. Bruce Cran, President of the Consumers' Association of Canada.

Today, the Consumers' Association of Canada released the results of its national poll on the labelling of genetically modified foods. The poll conducted in October 2003 by Decima Research surveyed 2000 people across Canada. The poll results are accurate within a range of +/- 2%. "Full disclosure of food ingredients is what consumers want so that they can make informed decisions," said Ms. Peggy Kirkeby, Vice President, Issues and Policy of the Consumers' Association. "Today, mandatory labels on food products tell consumers how much salt, fat, cholesterol and carbohydrates are in a particular product. Yet, when it comes to genetically modified ingredients, the Federal Government has said no, they aren't going to give this information to Canadian consumers."

Consumers clearly believe that the Federal Government has failed in its job in providing Canadians with adequate information about genetically modified foods. "When the poll asked if the Government of Canada has provided adequate information about genetically modified foods 80% of Canadians said no," said Ms. Kirkeby.

The second finding in the poll showed that 91% of Canadians want labels on foods that contain genetically modified ingredients. "There is no doubt that Canadians want information about what is in their food," said Ms. Kirkeby. "A label is a simple way to provide this information."

"It is very rare to get Canadians to overwhelmingly agree on a single issue, but the mandatory labelling of genetically modified foods is such an issue," said Ms. Kirkeby. The poll found that consumers want the government to make these labels mandatory rather than having a voluntary system controlled by industry. "The poll found that 88% of consumers want the Federal Government to make labelling of genetically modified foods mandatory," said Ms. Kirkeby. The poll also showed that consumers' views were the same irrespective of factors such as income, gender, region or education level. "It is clear that consumers simply just don't trust the food industry to voluntarily provide the necessary information."

This issue also cuts across political lines with politicians from all parties having supported private members bills in Parliament on mandatory labelling of genetically modified foods. Prominent Members of Parliament such as Joe Clark (Progressive Conservative), Deborah Grey (Canadian Alliance), Steven Owen (Liberal) and Gilles Duceppe (Bloc Quebecois) all have supported mandatory labelling. "There will be a new Prime Minister and Liberal Government next week and Canadians are looking forward to fresh ideas," said Ms. Kirkeby. "On behalf of Canadian consumers the Consumers' Association will be formally asking the new Government to introduce legislation to mandate labelling of genetically modified foods."

"Voluntary systems just don't work and consumers don't trust them," said Ms. Kirkeby. "It's time for the Federal Government to stop stalling, listen to consumers and introduce mandatory labelling of genetically modified foods."