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Consumers walk away from GM label group

By Barry Wilson, Ottawa bureau

The campaign by the federal government and the food industry to develop a system of voluntary labelling for genetically modified food this year has suffered a blow to its credibility.

The Consumers Association of Canada has decided to abandon the process it has been part of for more than three years and to demand mandatory labels.

"This is a step we should have taken earlier, but at least we've taken it," said CAC president Mel Fruitman of Maple, Ont. "Consumers want labelling of (GM) products and there is no faith that voluntary labelling will be credible."

An Agriculture Canada-funded committee that includes representatives from more than 50 government departments and agencies and food industry and consumer groups has been working since late 1999 to develop rules for a voluntary system. It is operating under the auspices of the Canadian General Standards Board, a government agency.

After two previous votes that indicated a deeply divided committee, many leaders expect vote results to be announced later this summer that will indicate enough "consensus" to allow the voluntary system to start.

The rules would allow both positive ("does contain") or negative ("does not contain") labels as long as they are accurate and verifiable, according to CGSB criteria.

One controversial part of the rules would allow up to five percent genetically modified content before voluntary labelling would be triggered.

In the latest vote, which ended July 28, the Canadian Federation of Agriculture was one of the industry groups to change its vote to yes.

Since environmental groups and others skeptical of or opposed to genetic modification have refused to take part in the committee because they disagree with the goal of voluntary label standards, the presence of the CAC has been an important measure of credibility for the project.

All of the players, from grocery distributors, processors and producers to Agriculture Canada and the Canadian Food Inspection Agency, have said the goal is to give consumers choice. The involvement of the largest consumer lobby group often was cited as proof that consumers agreed with the approach of voluntary labelling.

Fruitman said that never was the case.

The CAC always supported labelling but had not taken a stand on voluntary versus mandatory, he said. By this summer, the consumer lobby decided it had to leave the process because the result was not going to be adequate.

"The only way that consumers can be assured of the information they need is to have mandatory label rules."

And the five percent threshold for labelling is too high, he said.

"Consumers overwhelmingly want labels so they can know what they are eating," Fruitman said. "Voluntary labels at the discretion of the companies do not do it."

It is a different message for the CAC.

The original CAC representative on the labelling committee was then-vice president Jenny Hillard of Winnipeg, who supported voluntary standards as a first step. She often was accused by anti-GM campaigners of being too close to the industry and the government on the issue.

Fruitman said Hillard's support for voluntary labelling did not reflect CAC members' opinions or official CAC policy.

"She is no longer associated with the consumers' association," he said.