

Wash. Lawmakers Debate GMO Labeling

PHUONG LE, Associated Press

SEATTLE (AP) — Months after Washington voters narrowly rejected an initiative requiring the labeling of genetically modified foods, lawmakers are reviving the GMO debate in Olympia.

Lawmakers on Friday heard a bill that would require labeling genetically engineered salmon for sale, even though federal regulators have not yet approved any genetically modified animals for food. Another bill would require many foods containing GMOs to carry a label.

The debate comes as the U.S. Department of Agriculture appears likely to approve an apple that has been engineered not to brown when it's sliced or bruised. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration also has been considering an application for a genetically modified salmon that grows twice as fast as normal.

"Salmon is such an ingrained item here," said Rep. Cary Condotta, R-East Wenatchee, who is sponsoring House Bill 2143. "We label farmed vs. fresh caught (fish.) Why wouldn't we label transgenic fish? It just makes sense."

The bill also would prohibit genetically engineered fish with fins from being produced in state waters.

Currently, there are no federal or state requirements for genetically engineered foods to be labeled.

The Washington Farm Bureau, Washington Fish Growers Association, Washington Association of Wheat Growers and other members of the aquaculture and biotech industry spoke against the bill Friday. Some said the bill wasn't necessary, because state law already prohibits the use of transgenic fish in aquaculture.

Others noted that voters have already spoken — and rejected — a mandate to labeling of GMO foods. Efforts to require labeling in Washington state failed last November, when voters rejected Initiative 522 by 51 to 49 percent. Backers blamed the defeat on a record \$22 million raised by labeling opponents, including large biotech corporations and food manufacturers. Supporters raised about \$8.1 million.

"Let's be honest. Is this bill really about fish?" said Heather Hansen with Washington Friends of Farms and Forests. She added that the true intent is to stigmatize genetic technology and create fear.

Those who spoke in favor of the bill at Friday's hearing worried about the impact on the state's native salmon populations.

If FDA regulators clear the fast-growing salmon, it would be the first genetically

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altered animal approved for human consumption in the U.S.

The FDA is reviewing public comments on a draft environmental assessment, FDA spokeswoman Theresa Eisenman said. "We can't predict a timeline when a decision will be made."

Critics call the modified salmon a "frankenfish." They worry that the modified fish will decimate the natural salmon population if it escapes and breeds in the wild. Others believe breeding engineered animals is an ethical issue.

AquaBounty Technologies, which produces the so-called AquAdvantage Salmon, has said the fish is safe, that they will be grown as sterile, all-female populations in land-based facilities and they won't pose a threat to wild salmon populations. Messages left with the company were not immediately returned.

The FDA has concluded that the salmon was as safe to eat as the traditional variety and that the fish "will not have any significant impacts on the quality of the human environment."

Meanwhile, Okanagan Specialty Fruits Inc., a British Columbia company, has asked the USDA to approve two varieties of the non-browning Arctic Apple that it has grown in test trials in Washington and New York.

Those modified apples will carry the Arctic Apple brand, but not a specific label noting it is genetically engineered. "We're not labeling to say that, but we're not hiding it either," said Neal Carter, the company's president.

The company licensed the non-browning technology from Australian researchers. Essentially, the genes responsible for producing the enzyme that induces browning have been silenced in the apple variety being marketed as "Arctic."

USDA's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service concluded in a draft environmental assessment that the apples "are unlikely to pose a plant pest risk." The agency also found there's not much difference in the Arctic apples compared to conventional apples.

"Our expectation has been that we will get approval in 2014," Carter said.

A USDA spokesman said the review process for each petition is unique and he couldn't speculate on when a final decision may be made.

The agency is taking public comments through Jan. 30. Thousands have responded; many of them fiercely opposed.

The Northwest Horticultural Council in Yakima, which represents tree fruit growers, packers and marketers in Idaho, Oregon and Washington, has urged the USDA to reject the apple.

Christian Schlect, the group's president, said he didn't have concerns about food

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safety, but he worried about "severe adverse marketing issues" facing traditional and organic growers if the modified apples are allowed into the general marketplace.

"Our concern is general marketing issues given the number of consumers who have concerns about that technology," he said.

About 44 percent of the nation's apples are grown in Washington state.

"There's going to be people who buy it out of curiosity. Once they've experience it, they'll say, 'Hmm, I wish all apples were like this,' " Carter said.

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