Vt. Lawmakers Pass First State Bill Requiring GMO Labeling

DAVE GRAM and LISA RATHKE, Associated Press

MONTPELIER, Vt. (AP) — Vermont lawmakers have passed the country's first state bill to require the labeling of genetically modified foods, underscoring a division between powerful lobbyists for the U.S. food industry and an American public [1] that overwhelmingly says it approves of the idea.

The Vermont House approved the measure Wednesday evening, about a week after the state Senate, and Gov. Peter Shumlin said he plans to sign it. The requirements would take effect July 1, 2016, giving food producers time to comply.

Shumlin praised the vote. "I am proud of Vermont for being the first state in the nation to ensure that Vermonters will know what is in their food," he said in a statement.

Genetically modified organisms — often used in crop plants — have been changed at their genetic roots to be resistant to insects, germs or herbicides. The development in Vermont is important because it now puts the U.S. on the map of governments taking a stance against a practice that has led to bountiful crops and food production but has stirred concerns about the dominance of big agribusiness and the potential for unforeseen effects on the natural environment. Some scientists and activists worry about potential effects on soil health and pollination of neighboring crops.

Twenty-nine other states have proposed bills this year and last to require genetically modified organism — or GMO — labeling, according to the National Conference of State Legislatures. Two other New England states have passed laws to require GMO labeling, but the legislation takes effect only when neighboring states also approve the requirement. They are Maine and Connecticut; neither neighbor Vermont.

The European Union already has restricted the regulation, labeling and sale of GMO foods. Several credible polls have found that Americans overwhelmingly favor the notion of labeling genetically modified foods. Organic farmers and others are praising Vermont's move, while the Washington, D.C.-based Grocery Manufacturers Association, which represents food producers, called it a step in the wrong direction.

As farmers, Katie Spring and her husband are proud of how they grow their greens, carrots, potatoes, peppers and herbs and raise their chickens and pigs at their Worcester, Vt., farm and are willing to answer questions from customers. As eaters, Spring feels like she and her customers have the right to know what's in their food, whether it's saturated fat or genetically modified organisms, which they don't use on their farm.

But the industry is opposed.

"It sets the nation on a costly and misguided path toward a 50-state patchwork of GMO labeling policies that will do nothing to advance the safety of consumers," the grocers' association said in a statement.

The association is disappointed that Vermont is going at it alone and had hoped for a regional approach. Trying to have 50 different state rules about what goes on food packaging "gets very costly, very confusing and very difficult for the entire food industry to comply with," said the association's president, Jim Harrison.

But others are praising Vermont as a leader, even though they expect the law to spark lawsuits. The bill includes a $1.5 million fund to be used to implement the law and provide legal defense against lawsuits expected to be brought by food and biotech industries.

"Every Vermonter has a right to know what is in their food," said Shap Smith, speaker of the Vermont House. "Genetically engineered foods potentially pose risks to human health and the environment. I am proud to be the first state in the nation to recognize that people deserve to know whether the food they consume is genetically modified or engineered."

But the federal Food and Drug Administration and an industry group known as BIO, for Biotechnology Industry Organization, say there's no material difference between food produced with genetic engineering.

The Vermont legislation says there is a lack of consensus among scientific studies on the safety of genetically modified foods, and no long-term epidemiological studies in the United States examining their effects. Genetically modified foods "potentially pose risks to health, safety, agriculture, and the environment," the legislation says.

The Grocery Manufacturers Association [2] is urging policymakers to support federal legislation that would require a label on foods containing such ingredients if the FDA finds there is a health or safety risk. But many farmers see it as a David-vs.-Goliath victory.

"This vote is a reflection of years of work from a strong grassroots base of Vermonters who take their food and food sovereignty seriously and do not take kindly to corporate bullies," Will Allen, manager of Cedar Circle Farm in Thetford, said in a statement Wednesday after the House approved the bill.

Source URL (retrieved on *03/31/2015 - 4:45pm*):
http://www.foodmanufacturing.com/news/2014/04/vt-lawmakers-pass-first-state-bill-requiring-gmo-labeling

Links:
[1] http://www.foodmanufacturing.com/news/2014/02/vt-gmo-bill-gains-public-support
[2] http://www.foodmanufacturing.com/news/2014/04/gma-vt-gmo-bill-step-wrong-direction-consumers