

U.S. Senate starts debate on voluntary GMO labeling bill

Votes on Roberts' legislation expected as early as Wednesday

by Sustainable Food News
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The U.S. Senate on Monday proceeded to a floor debate on legislation that would establish a voluntary labeling system for foods made with genetically modified organisms (GMOs) and prohibit states from enacting their own labeling laws.

Sen. Pat Roberts (R-Kan.), chairman of the Senate Agriculture Committee, filed on Monday a [new version of his bill](#) (S.2609), which was [approved by the committee on March 1](#).

The new version of the bill was submitted Monday as an amendment ([SA3450](#)) to the Defund Planned Parenthood Act of 2015 (S.764), which will be considered on the Senate floor Tuesday morning. Votes on the legislation are expected as early as Wednesday.

The amendment contains substitute language aimed at satisfying some members' concerns over the need for more robust disclosure of GMOs on food packaging.

First, it allows food manufacturers to label foods, if they so chose, with "scannable images or codes" that "clearly indicates to consumers that more information is available about the ingredients of the food."

Consumers would then be required to access information on whether a food contains GMOs through "call centers, the Internet, websites, social media, scannable images or codes or other similar technologies."

The amendment does provide for a mandatory, GMO labeling program, but only if the Secretary of Agriculture determines, after two years of a voluntary program, that there is not at least 70 percent "substantial participation" in a voluntary program of the "most frequently consumed labeled foods."

Regulations defining the circumstances that constitute "substantial participation" and defining the term "most frequently consumed labeled foods" would be crafted at a later date.

Roberts is urging a speedy vote on the bill in order to prevent Vermont's mandatory, GMO labeling law from going into effect on July 1, and avoid a "patchwork of state-by-state" GMO labeling laws.

"This will be one of the most important policy decisions for agriculture in recent decades," Roberts said. "I have worked with my colleagues from both sides of the aisle to find a balance between consumers' right to know and ensuring an even playing field in the marketplace."

But opponents of the bill, which they refer to as the Deny Americans the Right to Know Act, or DARK Act, believe the legislation would do nothing to satisfy consumers' demands for the right to know whether their food contains GMOs.

"Under Senator Roberts' new version of the DARK Act, consumers would have to scan web sites, call toll free numbers, and follow twitter in the faint hope that they might find GMO information," said Scott Faber of the [Environmental Working Group](#) (EWG). "It's ridiculous that Americans should be asked to listen to hold music before they can ask what's in their food."

Meanwhile, there has been no movement on legislation introduced last week by U.S. Sen. Jeff Merkley (D-Ore.) that would require food manufacturers to disclose the presence of GMO ingredients on a product's Nutrition Facts label.

Merkley's "Biotechnology Food Labeling Uniformity Act" would amend the federal Food Drug and Cosmetic Act by requiring food manufacturers to disclose GMOs on Nutrition Facts panels in one of four ways:

- using the words "genetically engineered" in parenthesis immediately following the common or usual name of each GE ingredient
- identifying GE ingredients with an asterisk with a statement at the bottom of the ingredients list that denotes the ingredient(s) are genetically engineered
- applying a catch-all statement at the end of the ingredient list stating that the product was 'produced with genetic engineering' or 'contains genetically engineered' ingredients
- using a symbol developed by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) in consultation with food manufacturers that would disclose the presence of a GE ingredient(s) in the food in a clear and conspicuous manner

"Every American who believes in consumer choice should be alarmed about this rushed effort to overturn consumers' right to know what is in the food they buy and feed their families," said Merkley. "That's why I have worked closely over the last several months with food producers and labeling advocates to find a middle ground that protects consumers' right to know, while ensuring that food producers are not burdened by unfair or conflicting labeling requirements."