

ILLINOIS SENATE BILL WOULD LABEL GENETICALLY ENGINEERED FOOD

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SUMMARY: "A proposed Illinois senate bill aims to label all genetically engineered food. A hearing on the bill takes place this Wednesday in the southern Illinois town of Carbondale. Emily Carroll of the advocacy group Food and Water Watch supports the bill."

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Emily Carroll of the advocacy group Food and Water Watch supports the bill..

"This is not a ban, it's not about economics, it's not about science, this is just about the consumer's right to know," Carroll said. "We can't track the effects of genetically engineered food because right now they aren't labelled. This is a huge public health experiment but without the information for people to actually know what they're eating."

The legislation won't address the merits or drawbacks of genetic engineering, says the sponsor of the bill, Senator David Koehler (D-Peoria). He says he'll leave that question to experts and scientists.

The last public hearing on the labelling bill is scheduled for September 17th in Chicago. Similar legislation earlier this summer passed in Maine and Connecticut, but failed in California last fall. More than 10 other states are considering labeling measures. In polls like these two, Americans support labelling genetically engineered food.

Back when the California bill was being debated, the American Association for the Advancement of Science issued a statement saying the science is clear -- "crop improvement by the modern molecular techniques of biotechnology is safe." AAAS says the Food and Drug Administration requires special labelling on food only if there is a special health or environmental risk without that information. It concludes that in this case, "legally mandated labels will only mislead and falsely alarm consumers."

It's not that simple, says Jennifer Kuzma, an associate professor of science and technology policy at the University of Minnesota. Last fall, she reviewed the scientific literature on genetically engineered food.

"You can't really say that all genetically engineered foods are safe or unsafe," she said.

For example, scientists could take a scorpion toxin and put it into a corn plant, or an allergen from shrimp or seafood and put it into corn. Kuzma says that's probably not very safe. On the other hand, she points out plants have naturally occurring toxins to defend themselves against insects. For example, if farmers used conventional methods to breed potatoes that have more of their natural toxins, than those potatoes might not be safe for humans to eat. She concludes that both ways are capable of producing unsafe crops.

Kuzma says there are arguments for and against labelling, but points out it comes down to how much people trust the food industry.

"Often these decisions about these crops are made behind closed doors, and all of a sudden, people are presented with 'oh, it's on the market and and I'm eating it? Really?' I think that can anger people."

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She stresses safety is not just a scientific issue, but a social construction.

"I can say, 'I've tested this, and it showed no health effects over the two-year life of a rat, that doesn't necessarily mean that it's safe for humans to eat over a lifetime,'" Kuzma said. "I think we need to decide what is safe as a society, what will we accept in terms of uncertainties that we're willing to deal with in order to reap the benefits of some of these crops."

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