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Introduction

Genetically modified organisms (GMOs) are plants, animals, or microbes that have had their DNA altered through genetic engineering techniques that splice in genes from other species. While traditional selective breeding modifies organisms over time, genetic modification allows for direct insertion of traits that may not occur naturally. “No corporate activity today is more controversial than the production and sale of genetically modified organisms (GMOs; another common abbreviation is GM for genetically modified foods)” (Jimenez & Pulos, 2016). GMOs were first commercialized in the 1990s and now are widespread in fields from medicine to agriculture. Insulin for diabetics was one of the earliest GMO products, using modified bacteria to produce insulin rather than harvesting from animals. Today genetically modified crops make up a major share of staple ingredients like corn and soybeans. Supporters emphasize benefits like increased yields and reduced pesticides, while critics argue risks related to health and environment need more research.

Impacts on Producers and Developers

The debate over requiring labels on genetically modified (GM) foods involves weighing potential benefits for consumers against costs and burdens for producers. Mandatory GMO labeling could impact various stakeholders in different ways. This analysis will examine the possible effects of labeling policies on biotechnology companies developing GM crops, research activities around genetic engineering, and consumer attitudes and choice.

Mandatory GMO labeling would likely have several negative impacts on producers and developers of genetically modified foods. First, implementing segregation and identity preservation systems to keep GMO and non-GMO ingredients separate would increase costs for food companies using GMOs. Complying with labeling regulations would also create administrative burdens.

Additionally, if labeling decreases consumer acceptance of foods with GMO ingredients, producers may face reduced sales and less incentive to invest in further GMO research and development. The costs of mandatory labeling and potential drop in sales could reduce private sector funding going into genetic engineering of new crop varieties.

Impacts on Research

Requiring GMO labels could shift research priorities away from genetic modification techniques.

With likely decreased commercial returns from GM crops and ingredients, companies would have less financial incentive to fund R&D in this area. Academic and public research could also move focus toward non-GM plant breeding methods instead of GM traits. The introduction of newer GMO crop traits into the market would likely slow under mandatory labeling regimes skeptical of genetic modification. However, labeling proponents argue independent safety research on GMOs needs to expand to address questions about long-term impacts.

Impacts on Consumers

GMO labeling would provide consumers with greater ability to identify and choose whether to purchase foods with GM ingredients, based on personal preferences regarding biotechnology. Labels may also alleviate concerns among consumers worried about potential health or environmental risks of GMOs, by allowing avoidance of GM foods. However, labeling could confuse consumers if labels are misunderstood as safety warnings rather than factual disclosures. Prices may increase slightly if added identity preservation costs are passed on, but estimates vary on the size of this effect. Among consumers already avoiding GMO foods, mandatory labels would provide assurance that food choices align with personal values. But labels may also reduce overall consumer choice if companies reformulate products to avoid GMO labeling requirements.

Conclusion

In summary, mandatory GMO food labels would enable more informed consumer choice but could also discourage research and raise costs for producers using genetic engineering. Policymakers grappling with this issue must balance public demand for transparency against potential burdens on the biotechnology industry. Compromise policies like voluntary labeling or thresholds for GM content could mitigate negative impacts. But the debate involves values and risk perceptions, not just economic weights. Resolving these tradeoffs requires public discourse and education around both the risks and benefits of GMOs.

References:

Jimenez, G. C., & Pulos, E. (2016). Good Corporation, Bad Corporation: Corporate Social Responsibility in the Global Economy. Open SUNY Textbooks. Retrieved from: <https://milnepublishing.geneseo.edu/good-corporation-bad-corporation/>.

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