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Testimony of Gary Hirshberg

Before the

Senate Committee on Agriculture

On

Agriculture Biotechnology: A Look at Federal Regulation
and Stakeholder Perspectives

October 20, 2015

Thank you Chairman Roberts and Ranking Member Stabenow for the opportunity to testify today.

My name is Gary Hirshberg and I am the co-founder, chairman and former 30-year CEO of Stonyfield Farm. I also serve or have served as a director and advisor for numerous conventional and organic food and beverage companies now owned by firms such as Coca-Cola, Hormel and General Mills.

Today, however, I am appearing as Chairman of Just Label It, a coalition of more than 700 businesses and organizations dedicated to a mandatory disclosure system for products containing genetically modified organisms or GMOs.

I have seen first-hand a remarkable and encouraging shift in consumer interest in food in the last 20 years. Consumers – especially millennials – are demanding transparency as never before. Consumer interest in food and farming is a trend that should be welcomed because our food choices have an enormous impact on our health and on the health of our environment.

Growth in demand for sustainably grown food is also good for agriculture because two decades of double-digit annual growth in these categories is creating billions of dollars of new

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revenue, creating millions of jobs, and creating new opportunities for farmers, especially younger farmers. When I started Stonyfield, most consumers had no idea what “organic” meant. Now, annual organic sales are nearing \$40 billion, and most of the nation’s largest food manufacturers are actively engaged in the category.

Our position is simple: Consumers have the right to know what is in their food and how it is grown – the same right held by citizens in 64 nations. Recent polling and consumer data tell us that nine out of ten Americans - regardless of age, income, race or party affiliation - want the right to know whether the food they eat and purchase for their families contains GMOs.¹ Consumers give many reasons for wanting these disclosures, but chief among them is the extent to which GMO crops have increased the use of herbicides linked to serious health problems.

Let me be very clear: we strongly support a national GMO disclosure system that provides factual information. We do not support a warning or a disclosure system that renders a judgment on GMOs and are certainly not seeking a ban on GMO crops. Rather, we support a value-neutral disclosure that respects the right of consumers to make their own choices.

Actual experience shows that food prices have not increased in the 64 countries that have adopted GMO labels, nor do consumers in these countries view GMO disclosures as warnings. At the same time that GMO disclosures have been adopted around the globe, GMO crop acreage has steadily increased – from 27 million acres in 1997, when the first GMO label was introduced, to 448 million acres in 2014.²

The world’s second largest producer of GMO crops – Brazil – implemented mandatory GMO labeling³ in 2003, yet less than 1% of food sales in Brazil are organic⁴ and Brazilians have

¹ The Mellman Group, for Just Label It, at <http://4bgr3aepis44c9bxt1ulxsyq.wpengine.netdna-cdn.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/2015JLISurvey.pdf>

² James, Clive. 2014. Global Status of Commercialized Biotech/GM Crops: 2014. *ISAAA Brief No. 49*. ISAAA: Ithaca, NY.

³ Library of Congress. 2015. Restrictions on Genetically Modified Organisms: Brazil. <<http://www.loc.gov/law/help/restrictions-on-gmos/brazil.php>>.

accepted GMO foods in the marketplace.⁵ Claims that a mandatory disclosure would disrupt GMO expansion were disproved by actual marketplace experience.

I know from my own experience that food companies change our labels all the time to highlight new innovations and that food companies and farmers already segregate GMO and conventional ingredients to serve our markets at home and abroad. I also know from experience that a value-neutral disclosure will not cause sudden shifts in consumer behavior. A recent five-year study of consumer data confirmed that American consumers will not view a GMO disclosure as a warning.⁶

The Just Label It coalition and I welcome the opportunity to work with the Committee and with farmers, food manufacturers, and other stakeholders to craft a disclosure that is national, that is mandatory, that works for consumers, and that works for the food industry. You should not have to live in Vermont to know what's in your food and how it's grown. The Des Moines Register, in a 2014 editorial⁷ entitled "It's Time for Congress to Require GMO Labeling" put it simply –

"Congress should set a nationwide standard of disclosure and then let the individual consumers decide whether the presence of GMOs in a product is something that concerns them. But keeping consumers in the dark is never the right thing to do."

In the absence of such a system, we urge the Senate to reject efforts to block state GMO disclosures or limit the Administration's authority to develop a national solution. Such efforts

⁴ Bruha, Patrick. 2015. Organic Food Market In Brazil. *The Brazil Business*.

<<http://thebrazilbusiness.com/article/organic-food-market-in-brazil>>. 13 May 2015.

⁵ González, et al. 2009. Consumer Acceptance of Second-Generation GM Foods: The Case of Biofortified Cassava in the North-east of Brazil. *Journal of Agricultural Economics*. Vol. 60, Issue 3, pp. 604-624.

⁶ Reidel, John C. 2015. New Study: Consumers Don't View GMO Labels as Negative 'Warnings.' *University Commons*. <<http://www.uvm.edu/~uvmpr/?Page=news&storyID=21203&category=uvmhome>>.

⁷ The Des Moines Register Editorial Board. It's Time for Congress to Require GMO Labeling. 25 July 2014.

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contradict Congress' longstanding view that states should be able to require simple factual disclosures on food labels and that the FDA and USDA should have the authority to require disclosures that help consumers make informed decisions.

Farmers should of course have choices. And so too should consumers. The fastest creators of new on-farm and factory jobs are the companies and brands that are most transparently responsive to consumer desires. The 21st century consumer demands food that is, above all, transparent, and Congress as well as the food industry should honor and support, and most certainly not block, this fundamental right.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify. I look forward to your questions.

The Register's Editorial: It's time for Congress to require GMO labeling

The Register's Editorial 3:28 p.m. CDT July 25, 2014



(Photo: The Register)

A fight is brewing between America's consumers and the giant businesses that grow and manufacture our nation's foods. At issue is the use of so called GMOs, or genetically modified organisms, in those foods.

The fight over genetic engineering boils down to this underlying disagreement:

Consumers want to know what is in the foods they are eating. They want government — either their state or, better yet, the federal government — to require growers and processors to label their products to disclose the presence of GMOs so shoppers know what is in the foods they are buying at the supermarket.

Those growers, manufacturers and processors don't want to be forced to go to the expense of labeling their many products. And they especially don't want the government telling them what they must do. Besides, these companies say, research has shown that GMOs are not harmful to people's health.

The fight ratcheted up several notches this spring when Vermont became the first state to require labeling of foods made with GMOs when they are sold in that state. One giant trade organization, the Grocery Manufacturers Association, has sued in an attempt to block the Vermont law.

The debate really hasn't occurred in Iowa in a prominent way, in part because of the prevalence of GMOs in Iowa agriculture and because of the clout that such agribusinesses as DuPont Pioneer and Monsanto wield in this state. But that doesn't mean there aren't strong feelings in Iowa on both sides of the GMO labeling debate.

Even though Congress has done its best to ignore the labeling issue, agriculture and business interests are kidding themselves if they think the push for GMO disclosure is going to blow over anytime soon.

Scott Faber, vice president of government affairs for the Environmental Working Group, told Gannett's Christopher Doering last week, "We're in the midst of an area of food democracy the likes of which we've never seen. People want to know everything about their food, what's in it, who made it, where it's from, how it's made. The politicians who are trying to deny people the right to know about their food are running headlong into this sort of brick wall of opposition."

Doering reported last week that food and agribusiness companies, including Monsanto and DuPont, are supporting a bill by Rep. Mike Pompeo, R-Kan., that would ban mandatory GMO food labeling by the states and let food companies decide if they want to disclose the presence of GMOs on their package labels.

That's not going to be sufficient for the people who are buying these companies' products. Consumers want transparency. More than 60 other nations already give their shoppers that information so they can decide whether it's an issue for them if foods they buy contain genetically engineered ingredients.

Corporate America is fighting a losing battle over the GMO issue. Consumers wanted to know — and now product labels tell them — how much sugar is in their foods. Consumers have been pressuring restaurant chains to post the calorie counts for their various products, and those chains are coming around to understand the consumers' wishes.

It's the same with the use of GMOs. Congress should set a nationwide standard of disclosure and then let the individual consumers decide whether the presence of GMOs in a product is something that concerns them.

But keeping consumers in the dark is never the right thing to do.

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