



Submission to Food Standards
Australia New Zealand –
Application A1097

February 2015

57 Carrington Road Marrickville NSW 2204

**Phone 02 9577 3333 Fax 02 9577 3377 Email ausconsumer@choice.com.au
www.choice.com.au**

The Australian Consumers' Association is a not-for-profit company limited by guarantee.
ABN 72 000 281 925 ACN 000 281 925

About CHOICE

Set up by consumers for consumers, CHOICE is the consumer advocate that provides Australians with information and advice, free from commercial bias. By mobilising Australia's largest and loudest consumer movement, CHOICE fights to hold industry and government accountable and achieve real change on the issues that matter most.

To find out more about CHOICE's campaign work visit www.choice.com.au/campaigns and to support our campaigns, sign up at www.choice.com.au/campaignsupporter

Introduction

CHOICE appreciates the opportunity to provide the following comments to Food Standards Australia New Zealand (FSANZ) on Application A1097, seeking approval for food derived from herbicide-tolerant and insect-protected corn line MON87411.

CHOICE has long been involved in the debate over genetically modified (GM) food. It is important to state from the outset that CHOICE is neither for nor against genetic modification. Rather, our role in this debate is to represent the best interests of Australian consumers, above the interest of biotechnology companies, scientists, governments and farmers.

CHOICE believes consumers have a fundamental right to know what they are eating. Consumers want to know how their food was produced and have a right to choose GM or non-GM foods. Ultimately, the choice to eat or not to eat GM foods should remain with the consumer. However the current GM labelling laws fail to give consumers sufficient information about foods derived from genetic modification. Loopholes mean that highly refined products are not identified as being derived from genetically modified foods.

Recommendation: The decision to approve food derived from corn line MON87411 should only be approved if all foods produced from it, including highly refined foods, are labelled, allowing consumers freedom of choice in the market place.

GM labelling loophole does not allow for consumer choice

As stated, CHOICE is neither for nor against genetic modification and trusts that FSANZ's safety assessment of MON87411 is in the best interests of human health and food safety. Regardless, Australian consumers have a number of concerns about GM, particularly in relation to food. In a 2014 IPSOS research survey, 69% of respondents said that foods free of genetically modified ingredients is important to them.¹ This is a growing concern, increasing by 7% from 2013.²

FSANZ states it's mandatory for GM foods to be identified on the label, "to help consumers make an informed choice". But rarely do consumers see claims such as "contains genetically modified ..." on a food label. This is because the labelling requirements under the Food Standards Code apply only to foods that contain artificially modified DNA or protein. Products such as canola oil that contain no DNA or protein don't need to be labelled, even when they're made entirely from GM canola.

Consumers concerns about genetic modification are not necessarily about the final food product, but the process by which they are produced. This loophole fails to protect the majority of Australians who wish to know if their food comes from or is derived from GM crops.

MON87411

FSANZ states that the main food products from MON87411 (dent corn) are likely to contain novel DNA and novel protein and therefore are likely to require labelling. However FSANZ also

¹ IPSOS, 2014, The 2014 Food-Health Report

² Ibid

identifies that MON87411 could be used as a parent in the development of sweet corn lines, which because of its processing, are unlikely to contain any novel protein or novel DNA and therefore would not require labelling. Our research showed that dent corn has wide uses including being a source of glucose syrup, corn cereal, corn starch, corn oil, corn syrup and wet milling.³ Due the multiple uses of this type of corn, it is fair to say that it will enter the Australian market in a highly refined state and require no labelling. It means that consumers will be faced with an increasing amount of foods derived from GM crops without realising it, taking away their freedom of choice in the market.

While FSANZ states that “no potential public health and safety concerns have been identified” in relation to MON87411, Australian consumers want to know whether products are derived from MON87411 for a range of reasons. A survey by Eureka Strategic Research found that Australians are rarely concerned about the food itself in relation to GM but are concerned about a range of factors relating to the production process including; multinationals controlling the food chain, fear of new technologies, a perception that science is not regulated strongly enough, concern over all ‘industrialisation’ of foods and a ‘green’ philosophy pertaining to humans not seeking to dominate nature.⁴ Australians want to know whether their product both contains GM or is processed from a GM product. The currently labelling system does not meet the needs of consumers who want to avoid GM for non-safety issues.

GM labelling in other countries

CHOICE acknowledges that Australia’s GM labelling requirements are comparatively stronger to a number of other developed countries. However there are other countries which have greater consumer protection laws, meaning that there are consumers in other parts of the world have more rights over knowing what is in their food.

USA

Australian consumers are better able to identify GM foods than American consumers. In the US only GM foods that are ‘substantially different’ from their non-GM counterparts have to carry a GM label. Essentially, only GM foods that present a potential health and safety risk are labelled, for example where the nutritional composition is different from the non-GM equivalent or where the GM food presents an allergen risk to some consumers. Under US labelling laws, the reality is that very few products require GM labelling.

Due to this, most Americans believe they have never eaten GM products, despite the fact that approximately 70% of foods in supermarkets contain GM ingredients.⁵

³USDA Economic Research Service, 2015, Table 27 - U.S. use of field corn, by crop year, <http://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/sugar-and-sweeteners-yearbook-tables.aspx#25480> and <http://www.ncga.com/upload/files/documents/pdf/Tale%20of%20Twe%20Corns%20Feb.2013.pdf>

⁴ Cormack, G. 2007, Genomic age series [Series of ten parts]: Part 9: Public attitudes towards GM crops and foods, *Agricultural Science*, Vol 20, Issue 2

⁵ Pew Initiative on Food and Biotechnology, 2003, GM food safety: Are government regulations adequate? Referenced in Gruere, G., 2007, A Review of International Labelling Policies of Genetically Modified Food to Evaluate India’s Proposed Rule

Europe

Within the European Union and in some other European (but non-EU) countries, GM labelling laws are much stricter. GM foods are labelled on the basis of the method of production, so even highly refined foods, GM animal feed and animal products produced using GM feed must carry GM labels. There are also strict traceability requirements in place, so as foods and ingredients are bought and sold throughout the food supply chain; producers, processors, manufacturers and retailers are able to identify which foods have been produced using genetic modification and eventually pass this information on the consumers through GM labels.

The European situation is similar in Brazil and China.⁶ In addition, India recently decided to introduce mandatory labelling requirements for GM food which is based on the method of production as well as the content of GM in the product.⁷

Conclusion

Application A1097 points to a much bigger issue. GM labelling laws should be strengthened so that all products derived from genetic modification should be labelled, even when GM ingredients have been highly refined.

It is evident that the approval of MON87411 will bring in more GM derived products into Australia that will go unlabelled. This is a serious concern to Australians who without releasing it, may be consuming a greater amount of foods produced from GM.

We recommend that before this application is approved, FSANZ reviews the labelling system for GM and closes the loophole that currently exists.

Consumers will not be supportive of genetic modification if it is forced upon them. Strengthening labelling laws will allow consumers choice so that they can identify all products derived from GM or containing GM ingredients.

⁶ Gruere, G., 2007, A Review of International Labelling Policies of Genetically Modified Food to Evaluate India's Proposed Rule, *AgBioForum*, 10(1): 51-64

⁷ Ibid