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Summary

Proponents of Measure 27 argue that consumers deserve choice when it comes to selecting their food. They're right. Unfortunately, Measure 27 was written so broadly, and its terms defined so loosely, that many non-genetically engineered foods would be incorrectly labeled. Thus, if passed, the measure would actually make important personal choices more difficult to make.

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Measure 27 clouds otherwise clear choices

by Gregory Conko

Picture yourself in a grocery store. You've heard a little bit about genetically engineered or "GE" food, but you're not quite sure what to make of it all. Safe or not, you want to be able to choose for your family and yourself. So, how can you know which products to buy?

This election cycle, Oregonians will vote on a ballot initiative that purports to supply that information. But before you check a box on your ballot, you may want to ask what kind of information you'll be getting, and whether there's a better way to make purchasing decisions. If you want a choice between GE and non-GE foods, Measure 27 will actually make choosing more difficult.

Measure 27 requires special labels on any food items produced, sold, or distributed in Oregon if they contain or are derived from what the initiative calls "genetically engineered" material.

That may seem like just the information consumers need. But look again. Measure 27 was written so broadly, and its terms defined so loosely, that it actually requires many non-genetically engineered foods to be labeled as though they were.

Measure 27 defines the term "genetically engineered" to mean anything that is "produced or altered with techniques that change the molecular or cell biology of an organism by means or in a manner not possible under natural conditions or processes." But, not all breeding techniques that are "unnatural" involve genetic engineering.

Consider one example. Plant breeders at Oregon State University are breeding a new wheat variety for Oregon farmers, employing a high-tech method that uses chemicals to add new traits to plants. This variety's new trait makes controlling weeds easier and will help farmers adopt sustainable practices that reduce soil erosion.

It will be a boon for Oregon farmers and better for the environment. Yet, even though genetic engineering played absolutely no part in how it was produced,

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Measure 27 will actually mislead consumers into believing this variety of wheat, and anything made from it, is “genetically engineered.”

Conventional methods, like the one used above at OSU, are so commonplace that practically every variety of wheat, rice, tomato, potato, beans and countless other crops grown in the United States today has been altered with them. Unfortunately, because Measure 27 calls them all genetic engineering, consumers won’t be able to tell if a product really is GE.

On the other hand, if you would just as soon avoid any of the high-tech methods breeders use to produce better crops and livestock, Measure 27 won’t help you make that choice either. Some high-tech breeding methods—including in vitro fertilization and tissue culture—are specifically exempted from the labeling mandate, even though they too are totally “un-natural” and can only take place under careful scientific controls in a laboratory environment.

So, if consumers are really concerned about the safety of novel technologies, why make exceptions for in vitro fertilization and tissue culture? If giving consumers a choice between GE and non-GE foods is the goal, why include so many things that are not genetically engineered?

The answer to these questions certainly has nothing to do with safety. Dozens of scientific bodies, including the American Medical Association, National Academy of Sciences, and World Health Organization, have found the genetic engineering of food to be at least as safe as, and probably safer than, other breeding methods.

The reason for this confusion is that different consumers just want to know different things. When we rely on one-size-fits-all government rules, though, the result in cases like this is usually a compromise that satisfies no one.

So, how can consumers exercise real choice between GE and non-GE? The answer is simpler than you might think.

Right under our noses, food packagers and groceries are already voluntarily labeling products as “GE-free” or “organic.” Ben & Jerry’s ice cream advertises its GE-free status on the top of every carton. Wild Oats Markets, the organic grocery chain, even distributes literature in every store about how to buy non-GE foods.

Because they must compete for the loyalty of shoppers, food companies long ago responded to consumer demand for non-GE products. And they did so in ways that are better at providing real consumer choice than Measure 27.

Gregory Conko is director of food safety policy with the Competitive Enterprise Institute in Washington, DC, and an adjunct scholar to the Cascade Policy Institute in Portland, Oregon. Conko’s report, Eat, Drink, and be Merry: Why Biotech Food Labeling in Oregon is Unnecessary, is available at www.cascadepolicy.org, or call (503) 242-0900

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