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Why are GM Foods Not Labeled?

My Green Choices, South Africa, March 2008

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Genetically modified food, also known as GM food or genetically engineered food, entered the food supply in the 1990s. GM foods contain small pieces of foreign DNA (from other organisms and often from another species) however SA companies are not required to label foods that use GM ingredients. The foreign DNA in GM foods is engineered into the food in hopes of producing desirable traits like resistance to herbicides and pesticides, or resistance to specific pests. Insect-resistant maize, for example, is modified by inserting a bacterium gene that produces toxins and acts as an insecticide. Others have a gene that makes them indestructible when sprayed with certain herbicides.

The pro-GM faction - mainly GM seed producers such as Monsanto, Du Pont, Dow, Bayer and Syngenta - say GM increases crop yields, reduces farming costs and increases food security for developing countries.

In regards to GM potatoes, the seed developers claim that they are better for our health & the environment because they reduce pesticide spraying. However GM potatoes are engineered with an inbuilt pesticide to control the tuber moth. The pesticide is now inside the plant and farmers will still use a toxic cocktail of chemicals to combat all the other 99 pests, as well as viral, fungal & bacterial diseases, and weeds that plague potato farming in South Africa. Furthermore the toxin is accumulating in the environment and throughout the food chain. The tuber moth will also quickly develop resistance to the toxin, so this is a short-term and short-sighted solution to this problem.

Environmental bodies worldwide are strongly against GM food growth, agreeing that this is a dangerous experiment with health and could have a disastrous effect on the environment. They say it violates a natural organism's intrinsic value; that modified genes are being spread through pollination; and that it allows a few giant corporations to control food production worldwide, forcing farmers to buy new, expensive, patented seed from them year after year.

Many countries, including most of Europe, most Australian states, Angola, Sudan, Venezuela and Zambia, have declared themselves GM-free zones, refusing to grow GM crops. So strong is the anti-GM lobby in the UK that the industry has abandoned all attempts to get GM seeds approved for growing in that country.

South Africa, on the other hand, has adopted the crops wholeheartedly. Since 1997, South Africa has grown GM crops - including maize, soya beans and cotton - commercially. The Government does not require GM crops to be separated from non-GM crops during production, processing and distribution, which means there's no way of tracking GM food from farm to plate; if one strain caused adverse effects in humans or animals, it would be virtually impossible to trace the offending variety.

So here, in South Africa, we have no real way of telling which of our foods contain GM ingredients. 'The Regulations Relating to the Labelling of Foodstuffs Obtained Through Certain Techniques of Genetic Modification', do not require GM foods currently imported, marketed or sold in South Africa to indicate the presence of GM ingredients on the label. Andries Pretorius, of the department of health comments that, "labelling in South Africa applies only to GM foods that are 'substantially different' from non-GM foods or contain animal or human genes, currently SA GM foodstuffs on the shelves only contain inserted bacterial genes and proteins and

these foodstuffs are considered substantially equivalent to their non-GM counterparts and therefore do not require to be labelled.

An article in the Sunday Times a few months ago reported that many South Africans are unknowingly eating genetically modified maize. The article listed the following products as testing positive for GM maize: "ProNutro original flavour (52.7 %), ProNutro Toddlers Instant apple and banana flavour (97.5%), Iwisa Maize Meal (27.2%), Tiger Brands Ace samp (53.7%) and Purity cream of maize baby soft porridge (24.9%)."

Pick n Pay No Name Brand cornflakes and Kellogg's cornflakes were reported to be GM free.

Personally, I'd like to be able to choose whether or not my family eats GM food. Why can't products with GM ingredients be labeled, regardless of whether they have bacterial, protein or animal genes. They are in the EU.

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