

Consumer Attitudes towards Genetically Modified Organisms in the Food Supply: A Look Back and Ahead

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Poster Abstract

This poster presents 10 years of historical data describing consumer awareness and support for genetically modified (GM) food products. Although it appeared that consumers were “vindicated” last year when Walmart began to sell rBST free milk, the latest labeling controversy over AquaAdvantages’s genetically modified, fast growing salmon (AquaBounty, 2010), puts GMOs at the forefront of the consumer information conundrum once again.

The poster shows *some* triangulated results in graphic form from a series of studies of consumer awareness, knowledge, and attitudes toward GMs from the early 2000’s to the present. From the very beginning of the controversy, it was clear that consumers showed concern and wanted labels (See, for example, Halloran; 1990; Douthitt; 1991; Busch, 1992; Conner and Kolodinsky, 1998; Grobe, et al., 1999). Yet, industry balked at consumers’ demand for information (see, for example, Miller, 1999; Zeneca, 2000). The controversy has continued (see, for example, Striefer and Rubel, 2003; Teisl et al., 2003; Keisel, et al., 2005; Mohl, 2006; Esposito and Kolodinsky, 2007; Kolodinsky, 2008)

The poster highlights the findings of cross-section longitudinal data from Vermont, collected since 2001. Among the findings are changes in consumer awareness, and attitudes and intentions to purchase GM/GM-free products, placed in the context of the proliferation of these products and initiatives put in place to both inform consumers of GMO ingredients (e.g. labeling initiatives and the promulgation of national organic standards) and to thwart consumer information (e.g., lawsuits filed to stop GMO free labeling). Lastly, given the latest push toward introducing new genetically modified agricultural products into the marketplace, in the areas of animal and medical products, the poster presents some findings from a February 2011 survey.

Having studied consumer information issues and GMOs for the past 15 years, the authors can attest to the fact that news stories, public relations, and marketing has come full circle. It is quite clear from recent popular press articles (e.g., Layton, 2010) that the same four premises we asserted in 2000 still ring true:

1. Anti- and pro-biotech groups are using propaganda like techniques to further their own position---this in many ways confuses rather than informs the public;
2. Much of the debate regarding consumer information focuses on normative arguments rather than fact;
3. Pro- and anti-biotech groups are deciding for the public the grounds on which to base their decisions in the marketplace; and
4. Pro-biotech groups tend to be bottom line, profit oriented, and as such have different goals than consumers (Kolodinsky and DeSisto, 2000).

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Endnotes

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