

Is your food genetically modified?? check the label

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With effect from January 1, 2013, the government has made it mandatory to mention the sign, “genetically modified” (GM) on every food package that contains it.

While rolling out the new regulation, Food and Consumer Affairs Minister, KV Thomas, informed the parliament that, there is only a decreased level of awareness about GM foods amongst people in the country; the reason being GM food, which is relatively a new technology, has not been widely experimented. This statement came on the heels of the parliamentary standing committee report on Agriculture, headed by Basudeb Acharya, which also recommended compulsory labeling of all GM products so as to ensure that the consumer is able to make an informed choice.

With the moratorium on Bt Brinjal issued on February 9, 2010, which is still in force, India at present does not produce any GM food. At the same time, in non-foods category, the government has allowed commercial cultivation of only Bt cotton since 2002. The latest order therefore is expected to essentially affect food importers and the agri-biotech industry in the long run. For instance, Heinz tomato ketchup may need to display “GM”, if the original ingredients included GM tomatoes. The same will be applicable in the case of imported oils like soyabean and canola. Even imported potato chips and tortillas will come under the scanner.

Referring the move to be arbitrary in nature, Dr Shanthu Shantharam, professor, Iowa State University, Ames, Iowa and former executive director of Association of Biotech Led Enterprises-Agriculture Group (ABLE-AG) stated that, the labeling rule has been made hastily and without a proper discussion or consultation. He goes on to ask an interesting question, “We all know that groundnut and cow's milk is

allergic to certain sections of the population, but do they label them in the Indian market?

Dr B Mazumdar, vice president, Bejo Sheetal Seeds feels that at the moment it is very difficult to comment anything about the long term implications. "At this present situation it does not make any difference because the fate on agri-biotech still remains undecided," added Dr Mazumdar.

Illegal imports

Right to information (RTI) responses have revealed that no permission has been granted for the import and sale of any GM food in India other than purified soya oil. According to Food Safety and Standards Act, 1986, no person shall manufacture, distribute, sell or expose for sale or dispatch or deliver to any agent or broker for the purpose of sale, any packaged food products (including genetically modified or engineered food or food containing such ingredients) which are not marked and labelled in the manner as specified by the regulations. Genetic Engineering Appraisal Committee (GEAC), which currently regulates the GM food affairs wants some of its regulatory powers to be shared by the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI). But the Authority is still in a nascent stage and the general impression is that, its food lab in Kolkata under the Ministry of Health, is not so well-equipped. Dr Sagari R Ramdas, director, Anthra, while deposing before committee had stated that, "There is no system of labeling in this country. So, we have absolutely no way of assessing if the cotton seed oil is either GM oil or non-GM oil."

Civil society activists allege that many Indians may already be eating the controversial corn through a variety of imported products made out of GM corn. The contention is based on the fact that chips made of corn are being imported regularly to India by American manufacturers via dealers in Singapore and Taiwan. They point out that, in 2008, an import consignment of Doritos, a chips brand owned by PepsiCo, was detained by Customs authorities in Mumbai, as it was allegedly found to contain genetically modified ingredients. Following this, the importer penned to the GEAC seeking a "no objection certificate". The GEAC cleared the consignment based on an undertaking given by the company that the chips did not contain GM corn.

Greenpeace claims that tests conducted at an independent laboratory on products picked up randomly from a supermarket in the capital revealed Doritos corn chips to contain genetically modified Mon 863 and NK 603 variety corn ingredients. According to Shivani Shah, campaigner, Greenpeace, "There has been no permission granted for the cultivation of GM food crops in the country. But the imported processed foods in all likelihood may contain varying amounts of GM ingredients. There is a Directorate General of Foreign Trade (DGFT) rule to ensure no unapproved GM food enters our markets through import, but unfortunately there is no mechanism to check this at our ports of entry."

However, PepsiCo spokesperson had claimed that the chips were produced in Taiwan from locally grown corn suppliers and denied the official import of these chips into the country. Two Delhi-based importers on condition of anonymity told BioSpectrum that they were unaware of the GM issues and mentioned that they have been importing the Doritos chips and Heinz ketchup on regular basis. "The labeling might make consumers skeptical about the products and even might affect the other non GM foods too," said another importer.

Will regulation really work?

Many feel that the current regulation is weak and leaves room for misuse by the food industry. Given that there is no mention of the threshold levels, traceability and liability which are necessary corollaries of a labeling system for GMOs, it is also said that the notification needs to be fleshed out further to ensure that the directed intention meets desired objective.

Citing labeling as a very contentious issue, Dr Shantharam opined, "It is believed by the industry that it is like posting 'skull and crossed bones' on GM foods as it has been demonized by the anti-GM lobby. It is a trick to castigate the GM food and kill the market for it. Moreover, what counts in is the 'truth in labeling'. With the kind of supply chain that operates in India and other developing countries, it is very difficult to maintain a strict segregation from farm to fork. Therefore, whatever is served at the dining table may not be what it says on the label, thereby misleading the consumer."

But at the same time, the parliamentary committee report seeks to dispel notions that it might not work in India. It specifically mentions China, which despite being a populous country made labeling of such products mandatory. "The new regulation needs to make it clear that this will not only be applicable to processed foods from within India, but also foods that are imported as well. Labeling also needs to be applicable to oil,

which comes from Bt cotton seeds in India as well as soya and corn oil which is imported to the country from countries like the US," said Basudeb Acharya, chairman, Parliamentary Committee on Agriculture.

Rajesh Krishnan, campaigner, Greenpeace India, is strongly of the opinion that government must enact a legislation to protect the rights of consumers. "Today, consumers have no rights and no means to know which imported food contains GM. There should be compulsory testing and labeling of GM foods entering the country," enthused Krishnan.

With Ferderal Drug Investments (FDI) in retail being seen as a boost for importers, it remains to be seen how effective the new law would be in its checks and balances. Moreover, ensuring that the intended message has reached the consumer will alone not suffice, but the awareness about the GM foods cleared by the overseas regulatory agencies declaring it safe, should also be considered crucial.

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