



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



## **THE SENATE**

# **FOOD STANDARDS AMENDMENT (TRUTH IN LABELLING—GENETICALLY MODIFIED MATERIAL) BILL 2010**

## **Second Reading**

## **SPEECH**

**Tuesday, 16 November 2010**

BY AUTHORITY OF THE SENATE

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## SPEECH

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**Questioner**  
**Speaker** Siewert, Sen Rachel

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**Senator SIEWERT** (Western Australia) (4.05 pm)—*The incorporated speech read as follows—*

The bill requires producers, manufacturers and distributors of food to label all products containing genetically modified organisms or ingredients. The purpose of the bill is to give both consumers and farmers the right to be free from genetically modified organisms.

Many people want to be able to choose whether to buy GM products or not and at what price. We have some GM labeling, but most GM ingredients slip through loopholes. Currently although up to 70% of processed food contains GM ingredients almost none legally require labeling.

Currently, labels only have to declare the presence of GM materials, but not if genetic engineering was used in the process used to create the product. Highly refined sugars and oils derived from GM plants are not labeled leaving consumers little room to choose.

With 90% of respondents to a recent survey indicating that they believe that food labels should state that they contain GM ingredients, the Australian Greens do not believe that the current food labelling laws are adequate and that is why we are introducing this bill to the Senate.

The World Health Organisation defines genetically modified organisms as organisms in which the genetic material (DNA) has been altered in a way that does not occur naturally which allows selected individual genes to be transferred from one organism into another, also between non-related species. For example, genes from bacteria, viruses, plants and animals are inserted into crops such as soybeans, canola, corn and cotton to grow commercial crops. These GM crops are processed into foods and sold in our stores.

The full extent of the impact of GM on human and environmental health is not fully known but it is in these situations of uncertainty that precaution should be exercised.

For the environment, GMO's can have a devastating and irreversible effect. GMO's are capable of 'escaping' and potentially introduce the engineered genes into wild populations. The impact from season to season of GM is also unquantifiable with the GMO gene persisting after the GMO has been harvested. That means it is not as simple as having a GM crop one year and then being able to revert to non GM crops the following year. Further environmental concerns are the susceptibility of insects and other organisms which were not intended to be affected by the GMO, the long term stability of the gene, loss of biodiversity; and increased use of chemicals in agriculture.

For human health, there are three main issues which arise with the use of GMO's – allergenicity or allergic reactions, gene transfer, for example if antibiotic resistance genes, used in creating GMOs, were to be transferred to the body, and outcrossing, which is the movement of genes from GM plants into conventional crops or related species in the wild. The World Health Organisation states "this risk is real, as was shown when traces of a maize type which was only approved for feed use appeared in maize products for human consumption in the United States of America." There are no long term studies on the impact of GM on human health.

Under current labelling laws in Australia and New Zealand, very few GM foods are labelled.

FSANZ outlines, on its website, that "GM foods and ingredients (including food additives and processing aids from GM sources) must be identified on labels with the words 'genetically modified', if novel DNA and/or novel protein from an approved GM variety is present in the final food. GM foods must also be labeled if they have altered characteristics. Some exemptions are allowed under the labeling requirements. For example, foods which do not contain novel DNA or protein do not have to be labeled, such as highly refined or processed foods such as vegetable oils or sugars."

This means that food such as highly processed products such as oils, starches and sugars from GM crops; meat, milk, cheese or eggs from animals fed GM feed and food from restaurants and takeaways do not have to be labelled.

In Europe, by contrast, all foods and ingredients that are produced in whole or in part from genetically modified organisms must show this information on their labels, for example highly processed GM ingredients such as oil, starches and sugars have to be labelled, animal feed or GM food served in restaurants or as takeaway food.

The Australian Greens express concern at the ability of Food Standards Australia New Zealand (FSANZ) to protect public health and safety. A report released by Greenpeace Australia, entitled 'Eating in the Dark' shows the inherent problems with labeling of Genetically Modified (GM) products in Australia and New Zealand and our failure to adequately assess the safety of GM products. Consumers are still demanding the right to know what is in the food they are eating and our highest food safety authority is failing to deliver. We acknowledge that there is a Food Labeling Review taking place in Australia at the moment and we expect the Government to release the report early in 2011. We will monitor the report and take further measures if necessary after the release of this review to ensure that FSANZ provides accurate and adequate information for consumers regarding GM.

The current GM food labelling laws are weak and poorly enforced resulting in the vast majority of foods containing GM in the supermarket being unlabelled. Consumers have the right to choose GM free products.

90% of respondents in a 2008 Newspan poll commissioned by Greenpeace believe that food labels should state that they contain GM ingredients. 54% of respondents would be less likely to buy the product if they knew it contained GM ingredients.

One particular consumer issue that I have been advocating in the Senate is the contamination of infant formula with genetically modified (GM) soy and corn. I have repeatedly called on the Australian Government to introduce clear and effective labeling standards that ensure all GM additives in Australian food products are labeled and now, with Senator Xenophon, I am moving to ensure that this happens.

The bill also intends to drive changes in the agricultural sector. The current food standards code allows food which contains less than 1% GM not to be labelled if the presence of that GM is 'unintentional', i.e. the result of contamination during growing, transport or handling. This results in there being a 'care free' attitude amongst farmers as they do not have to take responsibility for actions that cause contamination. There are non regulatory controls in Australia that require segregation of GM and non GM.

The Greens did not support the lifting of the GM crop moratoriums in NSW, WA and Victoria and believe that regulation of GM in this country is grossly inadequate. There is no regulation in place to deal with the issues of contamination, segregation and marketing of GM and non-GM crops. The GM-free status of states such as WA is under threat by the decisions of NSW, WA and Victoria, and there is no federal legislation to deal with this issue. This bill intends to move towards implementing a set of laws to properly inform the community of GM

With GM canola crops having been recently introduced into Australia and being grown in NSW, WA and Victoria there is an increasing chance of contamination, Canola is used in many foods and there is an increasing chance of consumers buying and eating GM food without knowing it.

I also indicate that the Greens will be looking into assisting farmers by limiting their liability exposure. Currently if a non-GM farmer's crop is contaminated with GM it is unlikely that any loss of income would be able to be recovered and there is a risk that a GM company may sue the farmer for breach of intellectual property rights. The Greens will look into what steps can be taken to protect farmers from these legal risks.

I think Australia has a long way to go in our safety assessments of GM foods. We need an independent review of the safety assessment regime for GM products in food, and we need all foods derived from GM crops to be adequately labeled.

I am pleased to be co-sponsoring this bill with Senator Xenophon and I commend it to the Senate.