

PANEL TESTIMONY GIVEN TO THE FDA PUBLIC MEETING ON

“BIOTECHNOLOGY IN THE YEAR 2000 AND BEYOND”

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By

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I am Thomas Hoban -- a professor in the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences at North Carolina State University. I am a member of both the Department of Sociology and the Department of Food Science. I have spent the past decade studying consumer attitudes about food biotechnology. The FDA is to be commended for holding this series of meetings. Thank you for the opportunity to serve on this panel. You may recall that I also gave a brief presentation in Washington.

As you are aware, supporters and critics of biotechnology are clamoring to draw attention to their positions. The consumer, however, should be your most important consideration. Those who claim to speak for consumers may not be serving their true interests. Despite rhetoric claiming consumers want all biotech products labeled, research reveals different consumer views on this important topic.

Labeling Issues

Labeling questions on surveys are complex and ambiguous. What I conclude from my own research and other surveys is that how questions are asked directly affects how consumers respond. Let me highlight this complexity with two examples:

On one hand, opinion polls indicate that a majority of consumers feel foods developed through biotechnology should be labeled. However, almost as many want to know the country of origin for the food, and an even greater percentage feel labels should explain which pesticides were used. It will be hard to set priorities for limited label space when everything is very important to everybody.

A more realistic approach is to provide a meaningful context to elicit consumer views. In research I developed with IFIC, a question described the current FDA policy -- not to label foods developed through biotechnology that are basically identical to traditional foods but label those that had been changed. Here, we have consistently found that about three-quarters of U.S. consumers supported the current FDA policy.

As a survey specialist I hate to admit it but sometimes we ask people to answer questions spontaneously over the phone when they have not thought much (if at all) about the topic. Such results alone do not provide a sufficient basis for important public policy decisions. It is more valid to use focus groups that engage consumers in a thoughtful discussion. Let me summarize some focus group results:

First, we learned that consumers really expect a label only if the food has been changed in some significant way. We explored the case of a widely used cheese ingredient (chymosin) developed through biotechnology. Most consumers felt there was no need for special labels since the cheese is no different in taste, nutrition, or safety.

Next, we found that consumers see less need for labels on processed foods (then they do on fresh fruits or vegetables). We used tomatoes as an example. Few even recognize that food processors blend together different tomato varieties to get the desired taste or consistency for ketchup or frozen pizza. Most consumers don't particularly care about the ways in which ingredients in processed foods are developed.

We also found that consumers do not want to pay higher food costs for testing and to keep commodities segregated. Care must be taken with any labeling initiative because costs will ultimately be passed on to consumers, while imposing headaches on all parts of the food value chain from farm to table.

Finally, consumers mainly look to labels to evaluate fat, sugar, and salt content for health reasons. Many express frustration with conflicting information and seem overwhelmed by the variety of food already available. Most consumers say their scarcest resource is time. Complex labeling related to biotechnology would significantly increase the time and mental energy consumers spend shopping.

Over the past decade, my research and others have found that a clear majority of U.S. consumers are quite positive about biotechnology. We also recognize that people have unanswered questions. One effective way to allow for informed choice would be a system of voluntary labeling for foods **not** produced through biotechnology. If the demand is real, a market will become viable -- as seems to be happening with organic foods (which is a good place to position "biotech-free" foods). In this case, meaningful choice can be provided to concerned consumers without imposing costs on or denying benefits to the majority of consumers, who support biotechnology.

We clearly need more directed research to determine what consumers truly expect and need on any food label (voluntary or otherwise). It will also be vital to test alternative wording and placement of information so that it is truthful and non-misleading. Research has been important for identifying educational needs and will be vital for new policies or practices related to labeling.

Education and Information Issues

Education is vital for consumer choice. But, labeling is not the same as education. Consumers truly want and deserve more information about biotechnology. In fact, without a major commitment to education, any labeling initiative could likely confuse and alarm consumers. Let me describe an effective education program:

First, **what** do consumers want to know? They are very interested in learning about the benefits and uses of biotechnology. Next, they want an assurance that the products are safe for human consumption and the environment. Finally, they are genuinely curious about modern biotechnology. One effective way we have found is to explain this is to draw comparisons between modern agricultural biotechnology and traditional plant breeding.

Who should provide them with this information? An education campaign will require an ongoing partnership among government, industry, universities, consumer groups and others. US consumers have consistently reported the greatest trust in information from university scientists and third-party scientific organizations. The nation's land-grant universities and cooperative extension programs are eager to help educate consumers and opinion leaders.

Finally, **how** should we provide consumers with the information they want about biotechnology? Toll-free numbers and Internet sites hosted by third parties, such as universities, would be good mechanisms for education. The FDA or another group could maintain an information clearinghouse that describes products of biotechnology that have been approved, including the foods where new ingredients are found.

Bottom Line for the FDA

As the FDA considers the complex issues associated with biotechnology, please keep in mind the real consumer interests when it comes to food. Research has consistently shown that consumers want their food to be tasty, affordable, safe, nutritious, and convenient -- in that order. How seeds or other ingredients are produced is very low on the list; and will likely not be an issue for most consumers.

Providing the variety of safe and affordable food that U.S. consumers have come to expect, while feeding a growing world population, will require ongoing development and adoption of new technology. The continued application of science-based regulations will ensure safety and real benefits for consumers today and well into the future.

Thank you for this important opportunity. I look forward to your questions.