

Deal reached on labels for genetically modified food

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Regulators from more than 100 countries have agreed to new guidelines that will make it easier for food makers to say on their labels whether their products contain genetically-modified ingredients. But consumers in Canada are unlikely to see any changes here.

The Codex Alimentarius Commission, a group of more than 100 of the world's food safety regulatory agencies, agreed to the guidelines on Tuesday, after years of debate.

Until now, the U.S. had objected to such labels. But during the annual Codex summit in Geneva this week, the U.S. delegation surprised many by deciding to drop its opposition.

The new Codex agreement means that any country that wants to bring in new food labels that would identify genetically modified ingredients will no longer risk running afoul of international free trade laws or facing a legal fight in front of the World Trade Organization.

The new guidelines are voluntary only. But Consumers International, a large international group representing consumer groups, said it's pleased with the deal.

"While the agreement falls short of the consumer movement's long-held demand for endorsement of mandatory GM (genetically modified) food labelling, this is still a significant milestone for consumer rights," Consumers International President Samuel Ochieng said in a statement.

"This guidance is extremely good news for the worlds' consumers who want to know what is in the foods on their plates."

In Canada, about 70 per cent of food sold includes genetically modified ingredients from such common crops as corn, soy, and canola.

While many other countries now have mandatory GM labelling rules in place, Canada does not.

Health Canada, which shares responsibility with the Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA) for food labelling policies, does allow food makers to voluntarily mention whether their foods contain GM ingredients. But Eric Darier, who heads the anti-GMO (genetically modified organisms) campaign for Greenpeace Canada, says such standards aren't effective.

"I challenge your readers to find one label in Canada that mentions whether the food contains GE ingredients," Darier told CTV.ca in an interview.

"Voluntary labelling doesn't work."

Darier says while food labels in Canada won't change because of this agreement, but it does allow other countries to enact their own mandatory labelling standards without fear of reprisals from big GM-crop producers like the U.S. and Canada.

Health Canada has long contended that there are no known health risks from eating GM foods.

"Every new GM food product must undergo a rigorous pre-market safety assessment before it is allowed to be sold in Canada," the department says on its website.

"No GM food is allowed on the market in Canada unless Health Canada's scientists are satisfied that the food is safe and nutritious."

But Darier says many Canadians are not comfortable with genetic modification. Poll after poll has shown that most Canadians want to know whether their food includes engineered ingredients.

Health Canada says it won't call for mandatory labelling until it receives information that there's a health concern.

"But that's a bit of a silly argument," says Darier. "A lot of what already appears on food labels isn't about health or safety. Products can mention if they're organic or they're Kosher or whether they were made in Canada. That's not about health."

The bottom line, he says, is that consumers should be allowed to be fully informed about their choices.

"Consumers have a fundamental right to know how their food is produced," he says.