

July 14, 2016

President Barack Obama  
The White House  
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW  
Washington DC 20500

Dear President Obama:

We are writing to express our strong opposition to the bioengineered food labeling bill (S. 764) passed recently by Congress, and to urge your veto of the legislation when it reaches your desk.

As organizations representing thousands of organic farmers, businesses and consumers, we have long advocated for meaningful, transparent and easily accessible food labels regarding genetically engineered ingredients.

The bill passed by Congress falls far short of this goal and establishes many dangerous precedents that could undermine the USDA organic label and contribute to consumer confusion in the marketplace. The bill warrants your veto for the following reasons:

1) The bill intentionally makes it difficult for consumers to get information about genetically engineered ingredients in their food, and places a disproportionate burden on low-income and rural residents.

Specifically, the bill gives food companies the option of using an on-package label symbol, 1-800 number, or quick response (QR) code to let consumers know if the food item contains GE ingredients. The QR codes would require shoppers to use smartphones to scan every food item they are considering for purchase if they want information about the GE content in the food. For many low-income shoppers without access to smartphones, or rural shoppers without cell phone service or Wi-Fi in their grocery stores, this would block access to GE ingredient information in a very discriminatory manner.

2) The bill intentionally blurs the lines between GE ingredients and non-GE ingredients in a manner that will only lead to more consumer confusion in the marketplace.

The bill creates a novel definition referred to as “bioengineered” food, which according to the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), would exclude from labeling requirements most foods currently considered to be genetically engineered under the FDA definition and other commonly used science-based definitions of genetic engineering.

3) The bill preempts states like Vermont from requiring clear, transparent and accessible labeling in the market place, and replaces that existing standard with an ambiguous labeling standard that will deny consumers the right of access to clear information about what's in their food, and how it was produced.

4) The bill even preempts States from requiring clear labeling of seeds to let farmers know what type of seeds they are planting, and fails to establish any federal standards for transparent seed labeling to replace the State laws.

Consistent with other provisions in the bill that start to blur the lines between GE and non-GE foods, this provision will even block State efforts to ensure that farmers know whether or not they are planting GE seeds. Farmers selling to the rapidly growing organic and non-GE markets are prohibited from using GE seeds.

5) The bill includes a provision that is potentially disastrous for the organic sector, by requiring USDA to consider harmonizing the new ambiguous "bioengineered" definitions in the bill with USDA's long-standing organic standards and definitions governing the prohibition on use of genetic engineering.

Unless clarified, this ambiguous language in the bill could unravel the current role of the USDA organic label as the gold standard for consumers seeking to buy non-GE foods. Organic standards go far beyond the GE prohibitions, but for many organic consumers, this is one of the central attributes of the organic label.

The organic sector continues to be one of the fastest growing sectors of the U.S. agricultural economy, and this bill threatens to undermine consumer confidence in the organic label.

For these reasons and many more, we are urging you to veto this dangerous and unacceptable legislation.

Sincerely,

Beyond Pesticides  
Carolina Farm Stewardship Association  
Cedar Circle Farm and Education Center  
Center for Food Safety  
Citizens for GMO Labeling  
Cornucopia Institute  
Dr. Bronner's  
Equal Exchange  
Family Farm Defenders  
Food Democracy Now  
Food & Water Watch  
Friends of the Earth  
Genesis Farm

GMO Free NY  
GMO Action Alliance  
GMO Insider  
Green America  
Grow More, Waste Less  
Illinois Stewardship Alliance  
Institute for Responsible Technology  
Kanalani Ohana Farm  
Labelgmos.org  
Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners Association  
Midwest Organic Dairy Producers Alliance  
Midwest Organic and Sustainable Education Service  
Montana Organic Association  
National Organic Coalition  
Nature's Path Foods  
Non-GMO Project  
Northeast Organic Dairy Producers Alliance  
Northeast Organic Farming Association- Connecticut  
Northeast Organic Farming Association- Interstate Council  
Northeast Organic Farming Association- Massachusetts  
Northeast Organic Farming Association- New Hampshire  
Northeast Organic Farming Association- New York  
Northeast Organic Farming Association- Rhode Island  
Northeast Organic Farming Association- Vermont  
Ohio Ecological Food and Farm Association  
Organic Consumers Association  
Organic Farmers' Agency for Relationship Management (OFARM)  
Organically Grown Company  
Oregon Right to Know  
Organic Seed Alliance  
Organic Seed Growers and Trade Association  
PCC Natural Markets, Washington State  
Pesticide Action Network  
Regeneration Vermont  
Rural Advancement Foundation International- USA  
Rural Vermont  
Straus Family Creamery  
Sustainable Warwick  
The Organic and Non-GMO Report  
Vermont Public Action Research Group  
Vermont Right to Know Coalition  
Yellow Barn Biodynamic