

Industry employing bullying tactics to scupper GM food labelling in South Africa

Press Release: African Centre for Biosafety

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The South African government took the deeply controversial decision to permit the genetic modification (GM) of our staple food, maize, in 1997. Three years later they also approved the cultivation of GM soya. South African consumers have lobbied extensively for the labelling of GM food ever since, while the biotech and food industry have fought aggressively to keep consumers in the dark.

The Consumer Protection Act (CPA) of 2008 requires the mandatory labelling of GM foodstuffs and food producers were lawfully bound to start labelling from October 2011 after regulations to the Act came into force. However, labelling started appearing haphazardly and incorrectly and when non-profit organisation, the African Centre for Biosafety (ACB), began testing products, they alerted the National Consumer Commission to the blatant non-compliance and inconsistency that seemed to be creating even more confusion for consumers, as well as calling upon the Consumer Goods Council SA and the food companies involved to comply with the law. Industry responded that they were unable to label because the regulations were ambiguous.

In response to industry intransigence, the DTI published a set of amended regulations in October 2012 for comment, which clearly conveyed government's intention that all foods containing 5% or more GM content must be labelled. This has still not been promulgated due to a powerful industry lobby that does not want consumers to know about the GM content in their food and have lobbied the DTI and Parliament with fallacious arguments that labelling will raise food prices and cause a "food scare" that will lead to food insecurity. They insist that it is only the producers of non-GM foods that should be obliged to label their food products as not containing GM. However, this approach is inconsistent with the provisions and spirit of the CPA, which requires labelling for the presence, not absence of GM, so the next prize for industry is to insist that manufactured foods with GM content should not be labelled, only the raw materials, such as maize kernels or soya beans. In other words, none of the food products on the shelves containing GM ingredients would be labelled.

In a desperate bid to appease the industry, the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) held a stakeholder workshop on 25th July 2014 in Pretoria. In their opening remarks they thanked Africabio – who is spearheading the industry lobby – for their assistance and collaboration regarding identifying the stakeholders present. This apparent bias was strenuously objected to by the ACB, which noted the distinct lack of stakeholders present from GMO concern groups. The DTI explained that their intention was to advertise the workshop to the public but they failed to do so because of logistical problems. According to Haidee Swanby of the ACB, "the result was a process heavily dominated by the industry lobby, especially Africabio, whose sole purpose was to find a way to circumvent the good intentions of the CPA. Their arguments were based on insults about "the lunatic fringe" and false claims that a tiny minority funded by a "European lobby" was fuelling a demand for GM labelling. If their bully tactics work, South Africans will have no right to know that their staple food as well as most processed foods on our shelves are saturated with GM ingredients."

Since 2012 the ACB has tested a variety of maize and soya based products as well as popular maize and bread brands to determine their GM content. The public has been incredulous about the high level of GM in their staple foods, for example, all major maize meal brands tested contained between 55% and 87% GM content, while the GM content in the soya flour used in bread was found to be up to 91% GM. The labelling across these products was often absent, inconsistent or misleading, leaving consumers confused about whether or not these foods are in fact genetically modified. Campaign Officer at the ACB, Zakiyya Ismail said, “the food industry tells consumers they support the right to know and to choose but behind closed doors they’ve banded together to continually stall implementation and lobby hard against GM labelling. The DTI needs to step in and act immediately to promulgate these long stalled regulations and fulfil the mandate of the CPA”.

The Department of Trade and Industry has re-opened the public comment period on amendments to the GM labelling legislation until 15 August 2014. For further information or to submit comments, the public can contact: JSekgobela@thedti.gov.za

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NOTES TO EDITORS:

- The ACB's press release on the publication of draft amendments in October 2012 can be found here: Consumers win labelling victory <http://www.acbio.org.za/index.php/media/64-media-releases/405-consumers-win-gm-labelling-victory>
- Permits for the cultivation of GM maize, soya and cotton have been granted in South Africa
- In 2013 it was estimated that 86.6% of South Africa's maize production was GM. There is no segregation of GM and non-GM maize in storage resulting in comingling and an absence of non-GM maize on the market
- The ACB's tests for GM in staple foods found the following

Year of test	Product	GM content
2012	Futurelife	100% GM maize, 37% GM soya*
2012	Bokomo wheat free Pronutro	90% GM maize, 71% GM soya
2012	Nestle Cerelac infant cereal	76% GM maize*
2012	Impala maize meal	66% GM maize
2013	Purity Cream of Maize	56% GM maize
2013	Purity Baby First	71% GM maize
2013	Ace super maize meal	78% GM maize
2013	Ace maize rice	70% GM maize
2013	Ace instant porridge	68% GM maize
2013	Lion samp and beans	48% GM maize
2013	Jungle Breakfast	41% GM maize
2013	Nyala super maize meal	87% GM maize
2013	White Star super maize meal	72% GM maize
2013	Premier Course Braai Pap	55% GM maize
2013	Woolworths super maize meal	79% GM maize
2013	Iwisa super maize meal	81% GM maize
2014	Checkers white bread	91.09% GM soya in soya ingredient
2014	Woolworths white bread	85.62% GM soya in soya ingredient
2014	Spar white bread	72.69% GM soya in soya ingredient
2014	Blue Ribbon white bread	64.9% GM soya in soya ingredient
2014	Pick n Pay white bread	42.82% GM soya in soya ingredient
2014	Albany superior white bread	23.23% GM soya in soya ingredient
2014	Sunbake white bread	20.46% GM soya in soya ingredient
2014	Sasko white bread	so low as to be unquantifiable

* These companies have since pledged to remove GM content from the products tested