

立法會 *Legislative Council*

LC Paper No. CB(2) 967/01-02(04)

Ref: CB2/PL/FE

Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene

Background Paper prepared by Legislative Council Secretariat

Labelling of Genetically Modified Food

Purpose

This paper summarises the previous discussions of the Council since 2000/01 session on the need for a labelling system for Genetically Modified (GM) food in Hong Kong.

Background

2. Modern biotechnology makes it possible to alter the genetic make-up of living organisms by means other than traditional selective breeding. At present, about 50 kinds of crops for food purposes, such as soya bean, corn and canola, have been genetically modified. Insect resistance and herbicide tolerance are the most common traits introduced into these crops.
3. There is currently no international consensus on labelling of GM food or on a GM food testing protocol. The United States of America and Canada only require labelling of GM food that is not substantially equivalent to its conventional counterpart in terms of composition, nutritional value and allergenicity.
4. The European Union (EU), Australia and New Zealand, however, require labelling of all GM food if any ingredient therein contain more than 1% GM material.
5. In Asia, Japan and the Republic of Korea require labelling of certain food products which contain the most common GM agricultural products, such

as corn and soybean, as major ingredients. The threshold adopted by Japan is 5% and Korea 3% .

6. In Hong Kong, there is no requirement to label the GM content of pre-packaged or other types of food.

Public concerns

7. Green groups, the Consumer Council and some members of the public have called for the labelling of GM food to provide more information for consumers.

8. Public concerns about GM food mainly include -

- (a) GM food may cause allergic reactions and antibiotic resistance;
- (b) GM food may bring irreversible damage to the environment such as unintended modification of other species in the neighbouring fields of GM crops due to cross-pollination; and
- (c) religious and vegetarian groups are worried that they may consume food containing genes from animals which they do not eat for religious or other reasons.

Motion debate at the Council meeting on 5 January 2000

9. On 5 January 2000, the Legislative Council (LegCo) passed a motion urging Government to introduce a mandatory labelling system for GM food, conduct tests on GM food for sale locally and enhance consumers' knowledge of GM food.

Consultation Paper issued by the Administration

10. On 26 February 2001, the Administration issued a "Consultation Paper on Labelling of Genetically Modified Food". Public views were specifically sought on a number of issues, including -

- (a) whether a voluntary or a mandatory labelling system, or a phased programme of both, should be introduced;
- (b) whether the labelling system should be restricted to pre-packaged food ; and
- (c) whether the threshold of GM content should be set at 5% or lower.

Discussion by the Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene

11. The Administration briefed the LegCo Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene on the Consultation Paper on 26 February 2001. The Administration advised that there was no scientific or medical evidence to date to suggest that GM food was unsafe for human consumption. The Administration also pointed out that any labelling system to be introduced would have implications on food supply and cost for the food trade.

12. The Panel held another meeting on 28 May 2001 to further discuss the proposals in the Consultation Paper, as the consultation period ended on 31 May 2001. The Panel expressed support for putting in place a labelling system for GM food as soon as possible to enhance consumer information. While members did not oppose a voluntary labelling system in the initial stage of implementation, some members considered that a mandatory system should be introduced after a grace period of 18 months. A member suggested that a threshold of 5% could be introduced initially and lowered to 3% gradually. However, some members suggested that a more stringent threshold of GM content, say 1%, should be set.

13. Members also requested the Administration to strengthen publicity and public education on GM food. They were concerned about the enforcement aspect of the system, such as which party should be held responsible for the accuracy of information on the GM content on a food label. A member suggested that the Administration should consider issuing a White Bill on GM food labelling to facilitate the collection of public views.

Outcome of the public consultation

14. At the request of the Panel, the Administration has prepared a paper on the outcome of the public consultation exercise for discussion at the Panel meeting on 18 December 2001. However, due to the heavy agenda of the meeting, discussion of the subject was deferred to the Panel meeting scheduled for 28 January 2002.

15. According to the Administration's paper, the majority of views collected during public consultation are in support of mandatory labelling, and that the presence of GM content in any ingredient of a food product above a threshold should be labelled. It is also noted that all the professional medical bodies that have expressed views on the Consultation Paper are in support of the Administration's proposal that there should be additional labelling for GM materials with significantly different characteristics from their traditional counterparts.

16. The trade has however pointed out that the compliance with the mandatory labelling requirement will incur additional costs to the trade. The trade also indicates that, if the GM food labelling system in Hong Kong is very different from those systems implemented in other markets, overseas food manufacturers may simply give up the Hong Kong market because Hong Kong is a very small market for them.

17. According to the Administration's paper, the Administration will conduct an economic assessment on the impact of a GM food labelling system on the trade and on food prices before deciding the way forward.

Relevant papers

18. A list of the relevant papers discussed is in the **Appendix** for members' easy reference. These documents are available on the Research and Library Information System and the Council's web site at <http://www.legco.gov.hk>.

Relevant Papers

<u>Meetings</u>	<u>Meeting Dates</u>	<u>Papers/Motion Passed/Council Question</u>
Legislative Council	5 January 2000	A motion was passed urging Government to introduce a mandatory labelling system for GM food, conduct tests on GM food for sale locally and enhance consumers' knowledge of GM food.
Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene	26 February 2001	<p>Government Consultation Paper entitled "Labelling System for Genetically Modified Food"</p> <p>Submission from Greenpeace (LC Paper No. CB(2) 951/00-01(01))</p> <p>Submission from Hong Kong DNA Chips Ltd. (LC Paper No. CB(2) 920/00-01(06))</p> <p>Administration's paper (LC Paper No. CB(2) 920/00-01(05))</p> <p>Minutes of meeting (LC Paper No. CB(2) 1328/00-01)</p>
	28 May 2001	Minutes of meeting (LC Paper No. CB(2) 2314/00-01)
	18 December 2001 (discussion deferred to 28 January 2002)	Administration's paper (LC Paper No. CB(2) 713/01-02(05))
Legislative Council	12 December 2001	Question No. 15 on "Labelling system for GM food" of the Official Record of Proceedings of the Council meeting on 12 December 2001