

**For discussion
on 18 December 2001**

LegCo Panel on Food Safety and Environmental Hygiene

**RESULTS OF THE PUBLIC CONSULTATION EXERCISE ON
GENETICALLY MODIFIED FOOD LABELLING**

PURPOSE

This paper briefs Members on the results of the genetically modified (GM) food labelling public consultation exercise and the next step of our work.

INTRODUCTION

2. There is no scientific or medical evidence to date to suggest that GM food is unsafe for human consumption. The World Health Organization (WHO) and the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) have concluded that the use of modern biotechnology does not result in food becoming inherently less safe than that produced by conventional means. There is at present no international consensus on labelling of GM food or on a GM food testing protocol. The Codex Alimentarius Commission (Codex) is discussing the introduction of an international standard on GM food labelling and working out a testing protocol. It is uncertain when an international accord will be reached.

3. We issued the “Genetically Modified Food Labelling” consultation paper in February to consult the public, the food trade, green groups and other relevant organizations. The paper proposed a labelling approach that requires the presence of GM content above a threshold in

any ingredient of a food product to be labelled. Three options for implementation were proposed: voluntary labelling, mandatory labelling, and voluntary labelling to be followed by mandatory labelling at a later date. The consultation period ended in end of May.

VIEWS RECEIVED DURING THE CONSULTATION EXERCISE

4. We received a total of 6,359 sets of views during the consultation period. Among them, 5,747 sets used standard email, signature forms, and postcards supplied by a green group. The views expressed are almost identical. 554 sets were received from individual members of the public. The rest, 58 sets, were from various organizations or members of these organizations. These include 12 sets from the trade, some from several trade organizations that represent a total of more than four thousand member companies.

5. The consultation paper proposed three options for the way forward in introducing a genetically modified (GM) food labelling system. These are voluntary labelling, mandatory labelling and having voluntary labelling first, to be followed by mandatory labelling. The majority of the views received, including 5 747 sets in the aforementioned standard format and 502 sets from other members of the public and organizations, supported mandatory labelling. There were 41 sets of views, including those from several trade associations representing over 500 member companies, in support of voluntary labelling. Another 54 sets of views, including those from several trade associations representing over 3 700 member-companies, were in support of having voluntary labelling first, to be followed by mandatory labelling. There were also a few sets of views that supported labelling of GM food with significantly different characteristics only, or were totally against any form of GM food labelling.

6. Regarding the labelling approach, 6,306 sets agreed with the approach set out in the consultation paper, i.e. the presence of GM content in any ingredient of a food product above a threshold should be labelled. 31 sets said that labelling was not necessary or only needed when there was a health concern. Regarding the threshold, only 575 sets

of views have specific comments. Of these, 424 sets using the aforementioned standard format and 63 sets from other members of the public and various organizations supported a threshold of 1% or lower.

7. Concerning our proposal that there should be additional labelling for GM materials with significantly different characteristics from their traditional counterparts, 99 sets, including all the professional medical bodies that have expressed views on the consultation paper, supported additional labelling. 15 sets opposed.

8. On the issue of “GM free” and similar labels, 107 sets agreed that they should be used with caution. 96 sets supported the proposal that the trade needs to provide documentary support before they can use negative labels. 11 sets disagreed that “GM free” labels should be used with caution. There were also 11 sets that disagreed with the proposal that the trade needs to provide documentary support before they can use negative labels.

9. Regarding coverage of the labelling requirements, 57 sets supported the suggestion that only prepackaged food should be covered at this stage. 10 sets took the view that labelling of pre-packaged food was acceptable, but urged for exploring labelling loose food items in the future. 5,892 sets (of which 5,747 were standard forms) wanted GM labelling to cover all food items. 3 sets wanted to cover restaurants as well.

THE NEXT STEP

10. The trade has indicated to the Government that a mandatory labelling system for GM food would have serious impact on the trade and consumers alike. The trade has pointed out that under a mandatory GM food labelling system, they would need to obtain documentation from the suppliers or producers of raw materials to certify whether the raw materials have been genetically modified. They would also have to conduct tests on the raw materials and products. These would result in a substantial increase in the cost of food. The trade has also expressed the view that Hong Kong was a very small market for overseas food

manufacturers. If the GM food labelling system in Hong Kong is very different from those implemented in other markets, overseas manufacturers would probably give up the Hong Kong market. The trade is worried that there would be an increase in food prices and a reduction in the variety of food products available for the community.

11. As food is a basic necessity, we have to consider the trade's views on the potential impact a mandatory GM food labelling system may have on food prices and supply. We will therefore conduct a detailed economic assessment on the impact of a GM food labelling system on the food trade and on food prices before deciding on the way forward. We have already started the work.

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