

Rep. Joseph R. Pitts
Opening Statement
Energy and Commerce Subcommittee on Health Hearing
“Examining FDA’s Role in the Regulation of Genetically Modified Food
Ingredients”
December 10, 2014

The Subcommittee will come to order.

The Chair will recognize himself for an opening statement.

Genetically modified organisms, or GMOs, is a term that refers to ingredients sourced from crops that have been genetically engineered to express certain traits or characteristics. A number of people have an instinctive distrust of food that has been genetically modified, and are asking questions about its safety. Others see great promise for better nutrition and the alleviation of hunger around the world.

There are real sensitivities around this issue, and all issues regarding the food we eat and feed our children and grandchildren. It is our job as policymakers, particularly as it relates to the public health, to establish a factually and scientifically sound foundation prior to taking any action that would impact consumers and our economy. This hearing provides a great opportunity to put rhetoric aside and do just that.

GMOs have been a part of the U.S. food supply since the mid-1990s. In fact, as much as 90 percent of our corn, sugar beet, and soybean crops are now genetically engineered and about 70 percent of processed foods contain such ingredients.

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration oversees the safety and labeling of all food products from plant sources, including those from genetically engineered crops. These products must meet the same safety requirements as foods from traditionally bred crops. The FDA currently has a consultation process in place in which developers of the underlying technologies address any outstanding safety or other regulatory issues with the agency prior to marketing their products. FDA has completed approximately 100 of such consultations. No products have gone to market until FDA’s safety-related questions have been resolved.

According to FDA Commissioner Margaret Hamburg, FDA has “not seen evidence of safety risks associated with genetically modified foods.” Further, FDA has no basis for concluding that bioengineered foods are different from other foods in any meaningful way, and the World Health Organization has stated that “no effects on human health have been shown as a result of consumption of such foods.” In fact, they can grow faster, resist diseases and drought, lower reliance on pesticides, cost less and prove more nutritious.

Even President Obama has stated that “advances in the genetic engineering of plants have provided enormous benefits to American farmers” and that “investment in enhanced biotechnology is an essential component of the solution to some of our planet’s most pressing agricultural problems.”

Nonetheless, there have recently been a number of state initiatives calling for the mandatory labeling of food products that contain GMOs. We will hear today from a number of witnesses who can speak to such actions and the impact they would have.

Food labeling is a matter of interstate commerce and is therefore clearly a federal issue that rightfully resides with Congress and the FDA. I’m concerned that a patchwork of 50 separate state labeling schemes would be impractical and unworkable. Such a system would create confusion among consumers and result in higher prices and fewer options.

Finally, I want to commend Rep. Mike Pompeo (R-KS) and Rep. G.K. Butterfield (D-NC) for their leadership on these issues, and I look forward to learning more about H.R. 4432, the Safe and Accurate Food Labeling Act of 2014.

I would like to welcome all of our witnesses for being here today. I look forward to your testimony.