

**Testimony of Representative Kate Webb
Vermont House of Representatives**

Before the

Subcommittee on Health

Of the

House Committee on Energy and Commerce

December 10, 2014

Thank you for the opportunity to testify. My name is Kate Webb and I am a representative and Assistant Majority Leader in the Vermont House of Representatives. I was the lead sponsor of Act 120, a law that simply gives consumers the right to know if the food they purchase in VT is genetically engineered. This law is at risk should H.R. 4322 become law. Because Vermont is involved in litigation regarding this very issue, I want to be clear that I am not a lawyer, not a scientist, and not here as a representative of my state or my government. I am here as a Vermont citizen to tell you of the importance of this right to the citizens of my state, and to states whose citizens seek this simple request for transparency in order to make an informed choice about the food they purchase and feed to their families.

Vermont's Act 120, an act relating to the labeling of foods produced with genetic engineering, was signed into law on May 8, 2014 to great fanfare and celebration on our State House steps. This bill grew from the grass roots efforts of tens of thousands of Vermonters seeking to have a right to make an informed choice about the food they purchase.

This desire was not limited to a handful of Vermonters. A 2013 survey by a University of Vermont professor with 30 years experience in research about consumer choice, found that more than 75% of Vermonters were in favor of such labeling.

I personally became involved in this legislation in 2012. Over the next three years, we developed draft legislation to gain this fundamental right to know what is in our food; drafts that traveled through 6 legislative committees who received testimony from over 100 people, including scientists, lawyers, academics, consumers, manufacturers and food producers on both sides of the issue. Act 120 in its final form is the result of the many hours, weeks and years of work. It passed the Senate on a vote of 28-2. It passed the House on a vote of 114-30. Of note: many of those voting against the bill explained on record their belief that Vermonters deserved the right to know what was in their food, but voted against the bill due to the heavy cost the state of VT would bear in the face of the threat of litigation – a threat that was actualized only 5 weeks after the bill was signed into law.

Why is it that Vermonters want this right? It is about transparency and truth in labeling. Even though the World Health Organization defines genetically modified foods as “foods derived from organisms whose genetic material (DNA) has been modified in a way that does not occur naturally;” and Monsanto defines Genetically Engineered Organisms as “plants or animals that have had their genetic makeup altered to exhibit traits that are not naturally theirs,” many genetically engineered products continue to carry the word “natural” or variations of this word on their labels. I believe this is deceptive and Act 120 prohibits the use of this term for products produced or partially produced with genetic engineering.

Because genetic engineering is a relatively new and evolving science, consumers are concerned about unintended environmental and health effects and want the right to exercise precaution. And finally, we heard testimony that without this labeling, members of many religious communities could not tell if products they purchased violated their faith’s dietary prohibitions.

There is nothing in our law that restricts farmers, producers, manufacturers, or retailers from producing or selling genetically engineered products. Business and farming will go on as business and farming does, responding to the market.

Most people would greatly prefer a national mandatory GE labeling system and national rules designed to restrict misleading claims of products being “natural.” To

date, neither the current Administration nor this Congress has acted to inform and protect consumers with this labeling.

Unfortunately, H.R. 4432, the Safe and Accurate Food Labeling Act of 2014, does not create a national *mandatory* GE labeling system. Instead, H.R. 4432 codifies the broken *voluntary* GE labeling system and robs states like Vermont of the ability to inform and respond to our citizens who need this information.

One of the great strengths of a capitalist democracy is not only do we cast a vote at the polls, we also do so in selecting the products we purchase. Transparency allows us to see how things work, be it government, financial institutions or the foods we eat – what is in them, where they come from, and how they are produced. This transparency allows us to make informed decisions, and ultimately build trust.

I urge you to oppose H.R. 4432 and to support mandatory labeling of products produced through genetic engineering. Thank you for the opportunity to testify.