

Which came first, the allergen or the GMO?

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The EU's decision, earlier this month, to more precisely label all food products to better inform consumers of possible allergens, may have facilitated yesterday's decision to allow for the introduction of genetically modified (GM) food under strict labelling requirements.

On November 14, the EU council approved a new, more precise food labelling directive that intends on better informing costumers of possible allergens. The decision requires a complete labelling of all food contents, thus giving consumers a better chance of identifying potential allergenic ingredients.

Addressing the reason for the new directive, David Byrne, the EU's commissioner for Health and Consumer Protection, explains, "The complete labelling of ingredients is a direct response to repeated requests from consumers for better information about the composition of foods they purchase."

"This is a very clear example of the European Union working concretely in favour of citizens' day-to-day needs. I am particularly committed to a revised labelling regime that gives consumers much more information about potential allergens. This regime will extend from foodstuffs to include alcoholic beverages."

With this statement, although directed towards the allergen directive, Commissioner Byrne might have also been indirectly addressing the concern among EU citizens regarding the introduction of GM foods into the EU markets.

Commissioner Bynne also criticised groups who use "scare mongering" when dealing with public issues.

His comments were most likely intended for environmental groups, who have left the public wondering whether possible allergens have been introduced during the development phase of GM foods. This, even though researchers and companies take several steps to eliminate genetic material that could possibly be an allergen when developing a GM product.

So the goal of the allergen directive, passed on the 14th of November, was probably two fold: resolve public concern about food allergens, while also providing a compromise for hard-line countries such as France, Austria, Italy, in order to reach yesterday's GM food labelling consensus.

A third possible goal of the allergen directive might have been to prevent any US backlash, following yesterday's directive on GM food labelling.

The US has been warning against any labelling of GM foods, since it might send a message that GM foods are unsafe for consumption in some way.

The US, as well as many other countries, have been eating GM food for years now without any reported health problems.

In order to avoid conflict with the US, the EU may have drafted the allergen directive to demonstrate that the council's two new labelling directives are not intended to single out GM foods, rather they are new general approach to better inform its citizen about the food they consume.

Consumer benefits

According to the allergy association, 8% of all children and 3% of adults suffer from food allergies or other food intolerances. The number of affected people is yearly increasing. Thus, it is important to give detailed information on food ingredients in order to enable consumers to identify possible allergens.

The antigen directive most noticeably abolishes the pre-existing 25% rule. The former law, introduced more than 20 years ago in order to avoid long ingredients lists, states that producers are not required to label ingredients that represent less than 25% of the final product.

The new directive would be more similar to the labelling laws in the US. General terms such as, "vegetable oil" would no longer be permissible. The producer would be required to specify which types of vegetable oils are used, most importantly being peanut oil with this example. Other food items that are targets of this directive include ingredients such as: gluten, crustaceans, eggs, fish, peanuts, soybeans, nuts, celery, mustard, sesame, as well as others.

In addition, the directive includes milk and dairy products containing lactose, as well as sulphur dioxide and sulphites at a concentration higher than 10 mg / kg or l.

The labelling of sulphites most directly effects the wine industry, since—added, or not—all wines procure sulphites through the fermentation process. Recently, many wines have been claiming to be "sulphite-free," however this new directive might put an end to such claims.

In order to allow the allergen directive to enter in force, the EU Parliament will have to agree on it in a reading expected in early 2003. With the approval of the EU Parliament, and a smooth one-year transition period, consumers could expect to see a more precise listing of ingredients on all products by 2005 as a result of the allergen directive.