

Opening Statement of the Honorable Joseph R. Pitts
Subcommittee on Health
Hearing on “A National Framework for the Review and Labeling of Biotechnology in Food”
June 18, 2015

(As Prepared for Delivery)

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.

There are real sensitivities around these issues, 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.

Genetic engineering in agriculture has occurred for centuries. Ingredients from genetically engineered plants have been a part of the U.S. food supply for decades. In fact, as much as 90 percent of our corn, sugar beet, and soybean crops are now genetically engineered and more than 70 percent of processed foods contain ingredients derived from such crops.

The Food and Drug Administration oversees the safety 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.

FDA officials have repeatedly stated that the agency has no basis for concluding that bioengineered foods are different from other foods in any meaningful way, and the World Health Organization has confirmed 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, cost less and prove more nutritious.

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.

I'm concerned that a patchwork of 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 their continued efforts to work in a bipartisan manner on H.R. 1599, the Safe and Accurate Food Labeling Act of 2015. While these efforts will continue as the legislative process moves forward, I am encouraged that the revised language circulated in advance of this hearing has been informed by conversations between the sponsors, the committees of jurisdiction, the implementing agencies, and impacted stakeholders.