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Labeling for GMO food garners broad support

Most people say they know a little about the subject, but they still want a law to be enacted

By [Derrick DePledge](#)

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Three-quarters of voters interviewed in a new Hawaii Poll want the state Legislature to pass a law requiring that all food from genetically modified organisms sold in Hawaii carry labels.

The poll found that only a quarter of voters consider themselves very familiar with GMOs. Yet those with the most knowledge about GMOs tend to be the most concerned about the issue.

Carey Foote, a test proctor who lives in Moiliili, said there are strong — even rabid — feelings about GMOs at the community garden she uses. She sees both sides, though.

While she supports GMO labeling, she acknowledges that genetic modification saved the papaya crop in Hawaii from the ring-spot virus.

Foote does not think labeling would be much of a burden on manufacturers, since food products already carry nutrition and food allergen labels.

"I would rather have it be labeled so I can make up my own mind," she said. "Nobody likes surprises."

GMO labeling has a difficult path at the state Legislature this session.

Sen. Josh Green (D, Naalehu-Kailua-Kona), chairman of the Senate Health Committee, has moved two bills that would require GMO labeling by January. But the legislation now sits before the Senate Ways and Means and the Commerce and Consumer Protection committees and — for one of the bills — the Senate Agriculture Committee, where there is resistance among senators.

The House approved a GMO labeling bill last session, so much of the focus by anti-GMO activists has been on the Senate.

"I think it's easy to see the importance of transparency, especially in the marketplace," said Rep. Jessica Wooley (D, Kahaluu-Ahuimanu-Kaneohe), chairwoman of the House Agriculture Committee.

Wooley argues consumers want to know what is in their food so they can choose.

"It's easy," she said. "It's not a difficult choice. It's something we should have done a long time ago."

The state Department of Health has opposed GMO labeling, telling lawmakers that there are no practical and legally defensible methods to detect GMOs in food. The department has also said that there is no conclusive scientific evidence of negative health effects associated with GMO food, so the department does not view labeling as a health issue.

Food from genetically modified plants entered the food supply in the U.S. in the 1990s, according to the U.S. Food and Drug Administration. Most corn, canola, soybean and cotton crops have been genetically modified.

Hawaii has been a flash point in the anti-GMO movement because several large biotechnology companies, including Monsanto, have experimental seed crops in the islands. Kauai County passed a law last year that regulates GMO and pesticide use which is being challenged by biotech companies in federal court. Hawaii County approved a law that prohibits new GMO crops.

Lauren Zirbel, executive director of the Hawaii Food Industry Association, has warned state lawmakers that a GMO labeling requirement would likely drive up Hawaii's already high food prices. Mainland and foreign manufacturers, if forced to label, may also choose not to ship products to Hawaii given the state's relatively small consumer market.

"We're just not going to get the national distributors and manufacturers to label specifically for the state of Hawaii," Zirbel said. "So in that way it will be almost impossible for us to follow through on that mandate."

Some retailers are voluntarily moving toward GMO labeling to cater to consumer demand. Whole Foods Market, for example, has pledged to label all GMO products in stores in the U.S. and Canada by 2018.

The Hawaii Poll was taken by telephone landlines and cellphones from Feb. 1 to 11 among 642 voters statewide. The margin of error was 3.9 percentage points.

Twenty-five percent of voters said they were very familiar with GMOs, while 49 percent said they were somewhat familiar, 15 percent said they were somewhat unfamiliar and 11 percent said they were very unfamiliar.

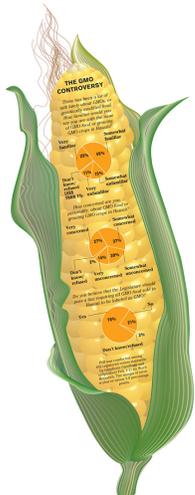
Twenty-seven percent said they were very concerned about GMOs, while 37 percent said they were somewhat concerned. Among the quarter of voters who were very familiar with GMOs, 49 percent said they were very concerned about the issue.

Women are the most worried about GMOs, the poll found, and women, Native Hawaiians, young people and the poor had the highest degree of interest in GMO labeling.

Support for GMO labeling was broad-based — 76 percent want the Legislature to take action.

"I think we have to acknowledge that much of the electorate is not very familiar with the issue," said Rebecca Ward, president of Ward Research Inc., which conducted the poll for the Hono-lulu Star-Advertiser and Hawaii News Now. "And it's easy at this point to say, 'Yes, we ought to have a law.' But there hasn't been much education about it."

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