

GMO labeling debate coming to Illinois

By Jim Nowlan

This spring, Illinois legislators will face the issue of whether the state should require labels on foods that have been “entirely or partially produced with genetic engineering.”

The lawmakers will have a difficult time separating the wheat from the chaff on an issue that is generating increased interest nationally, much to the chagrin of Monsanto and a handful of companies that control the hybrid seed market.

There is no middle ground in the debate between the “naturalists” and the big seed companies over the touted evils and virtues, respectively, of genetically modified organisms (GMOs).

As is often the case in complex issues, trust will be key to how the measure is decided.

State senator David Koehler (D-Peoria) has introduced SB1666, the Illinois GMO labeling bill. An inactive United Church of Christ minister and former owner of an organic bakery, Koehler is trying to frame the issue around the consumers’ right to know rather than to the contentious science that swirls around the topic.

“I have tried to stay out of the science,” Koehler told this writer recently. “All the bill says is that consumers have a chance to know whether the food they are eating has been genetically engineered.”

“Consumers have come to expect labeling of foods,” Koehler adds.

Indeed, I look closely at labels on my foods to know if there are trans fats and lots of saturated fats in them.

But those are bad fats, the seed industry would retort, while there is nothing to harm you in GMOs, so there is no rationale for labeling. The industry also points out that GMO seeds increase yields and reduce the need for pesticide and herbicide applications.

In the past two years, voters narrowly defeated labeling referenda in California and Washington state, yet lawmakers in Connecticut and Maine passed bills in June that require labeling on all foods made from GMOs. Twenty states, like Illinois, are considering the issue.

The scientific debate is intense. From what I can tell from my reading, most scientists consider GMO foods safe, including those at the American Association for the Advancement of Science, the World Health Organization and the European Union.

Yet broad public opposition to GMOs in Europe has caused the European Union to ban GMO foods. Today it is virtually impossible to find GMOs in European supermarkets.

The authoritative-sounding American Academy of Environmental Medicine cites studies in animals that show “organ damage, gastrointestinal and immune system disorders, accelerated aging and infertility” in animals that consumed GMO foods.

A non-scientist, I cannot resolve the debate here.

This is where trust comes in. When not competent to assess a complicated issue, we turn to people, institutions, interest groups, and publications that we trust.

When it comes to science, I tend to trust what the old-line publication *Scientific American* says. SA says GMOs are safe and that labeling would be a bad idea, that since the dawn of time we have been tinkering with DNA through selective breeding for desirable traits.

I recall, however, that the painkiller Vioxx was a decade ago considered safe by regulators—until it was withdrawn because it was inducing heart attacks and strokes in many users.

On a personal level, I have been taking a certain medication for decades. Yet only recently have I read in two health letters that recent research suggests the drug may decrease memory retention. So what is safe? And whom do you trust?

Sen. Koehler said in the New Year he will run his bill by his Senate Democratic caucus, to see if he has the votes to get it out of committee and onto the floor.

A long list of agricultural and industry interest groups have expressed opposition to his bill, so he has a lot to overcome.

Were I again a legislator, this would be a tough vote for me. I feel that GMOs are safe, yet I think the consumer has a right to know what is in his food.

About 70 percent of processed foods in the U.S. contain genetically modified ingredients, according to Scientific American. So maybe we should simply assume that foods are GMO modified unless labeled otherwise, as are many products at Whole Foods stores, I am told.

But rather than address the issue from a patchwork of 50 states, the issue should probably be dealt with at the national level.