

CONSUMER RIGHTS RECOGNISED: GM FOODS WILL BE LABELLED IN SOUTH AFRICA

PRESS RELEASE from SAFeAGE

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Cape Town: History was made yesterday when the Department of Trade and Industry handed down a ruling for mandatory labelling of genetically modified foods. The decision came after a clause to this effect, which had been removed from the draft Consumer Protection Bill last year, was reinstated.

National Co-ordinator of SAFeAGE, a consumer GMO watchdog that has been lobbying for two years to have this clause reinstated said, "The GMO Act does not protect consumers, it is rather a permitting system that welcomes untested, unlabelled and irresponsible genetic modification to run rife in our country. Consumers will finally have the right to choose once this Bill is implemented".

Parliament's Trade and Industry committee also withdrew a clause from the original Bill that rendered GMOs exempt from liability for damage caused by them. "Why should food that has been spliced with virus, anti-biotic resistant and herbicide genes be exempt from liability," questioned Treherne. "These foods should be subject to more stringent labelling, not exemption."

The Department of Trade and Industry's labelling laws have not gone unopposed. Both the Department of Agriculture and Department of Health have opposed mandatory labelling saying it would send out a confusing signal to consumers. However, spokesperson for the Safe Food Coalition, Andrew Taynton said that "the Department of Trade and Industry should be congratulated for this bold move. Current GM labelling laws in South Africa are so flawed that they do not label any of the GM foods currently on the market."

Mariam Mayet of the African Centre for Biosafety (ACB) commented that "government has embarked upon the first step towards regulating agribusiness involved with GMOs. Not only have consumers been given a choice to reject GM foods, now, GM food can also be tracked from farm to fork in order to hold Monsanto and others liable when we discover that something has gone wrong."

Treherne was however concerned that the Department of Agriculture would still be responsible for determining the thresholds and technical requirements of these new regulations, saying, "We hope this does not undermine the excellent work done by Parliament and the Department of Trade and Industry on the Consumer Protection Bill.

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Notes for editors:

-Clause 61 was removed from the Draft Bill, which read

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- Clause 29(1) which was removed from the draft read:

Disclosure of environmental facts affecting goods

In addition to the requirements of section 28, a person who packages any prescribed goods, or imports any such goods, for supply to consumers must display on or in association with that packaging or those goods, a notice in the prescribed manner and form that -

(a) discloses the presence, nature and extent of any -

(i) genetically modified ingredient or components of those goods, or

(ii) ingredients or components that have been determined to present a chemical or biological hazard to humans, relative to their concentration in those goods.

NEW CLAUSE: "In addition to the requirements of section 28, any person who produces, supplies, imports or packages any prescribed goods must display on or in association with the packaging of those goods a notice in the prescribed manner and form that discloses the presence of any genetically modified ingredients or components of those goods in accordance with applicable regulations". Missing is: 'nature and extent' (paragraph a); and The whole of (ii) Clause 61 (19 was removed from the Draft Bill, under Liability for damage caused by goods: Read: (1) This section does not apply to any genetically modified organisms regulated in terms of the GMO Act, 1997 (Act No. 14 of 1997).

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-SAFeAGE recently released the results of random tests conducted on a number of food products, including breakfast cereals, baby foods and staple foods. Some breakfast cereals include a high content of genetically modified organisms (GMO's) while one of the baby products contained a staggering 97.49%.

-The GMO Executive Council is currently assessing an application to bring a new GM food crop onto the market, potatoes. Potato SA is opposing the application.