

Food Industry Looks to Congress as GMO Labeling Law Nears

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The food industry is pressuring Congress to act before the state of Vermont requires food labels for genetically modified ingredients.

At issue is how food companies will deal with Vermont's law. They could make separate food packages just for the state, label all their items with genetically modified ingredients or withdraw from the small Vermont market. The law kicks in by July, but the companies have to start making those decisions now.

The food industry wants Congress to pre-empt Vermont's law and bar mandatory labeling of genetically modified foods before it goes into effect. They argue that GMOs, or genetically modified organisms, are safe and a patchwork of state laws isn't practical. Labeling advocates have been fighting state-by-state to enact the labeling, with the eventual goal of a national standard.

Agriculture Secretary [Tom Vilsack](#) brought the parties together twice this month to see if they could work out a compromise. But agreement won't be easy, as the industry staunchly opposes the mandatory labels. Lawmakers on [Capitol Hill](#) are divided, too, but agree that a compromise needs to be worked out before this summer.

A look at the debate as the food industry and Congress wrestle with labeling of engineered foods:

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WHAT'S A GMO, ANYWAY?

Genetically modified seeds are engineered in laboratories to have certain traits, like resistance to herbicides. The majority of the country's corn and soybean crop is now genetically modified, with much of that going to animal feed. Corn and soybeans are also made into popular processed food ingredients like high-fructose corn syrup, corn starch and soybean oil.

The food industry says about 75 percent to 80 percent of foods contain genetically modified ingredients.

While there is little scientific concern about the safety of those GMOs on the market, advocates for labeling say not enough is known about their risks.

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DUG IN

The food industry has been battling the labeling advocates for several years, spending millions to fight ballot initiatives and bills in state legislatures that would require labeling of genetically modified foods. They have also challenged Vermont's law in court.

Industry-backed legislation that passed the House last year would have blocked any such state laws. But that bill has stalled in the Senate.

The Food and Drug Administration has said GMOs on the market now are safe, and the federal government does not support mandatory labels. But supporters of labeling counter that consumers have a right to know what's in their foods, and say Congress shouldn't be trying to pre-empt states.

So far, Vermont is the only state set to require labeling. Maine and Connecticut have passed similar laws, but those measures don't take effect unless neighboring states follow suit. Several other states could consider labeling bills this year.

NEW TALKS

Hours of talks with Vilsack haven't produced compromise. The former Iowa governor hasn't taken sides on the issue, but he has previously suggested some sort of digital labeling that consumers could access with their smart phones or in-store scanners.

The food industry has had similar ideas, introducing voluntary digital labels last year that could provide consumers with detailed information about products. Information could also be accessed by an online search.

Labeling advocates have frowned on digital labels, saying they discriminate against people who don't have smart phones, computers or the know-how to use them.

"Consumers shouldn't have to have a high-tech smartphone and a 10-gigabyte data plan to know what's in their food," said Scott Faber, head of the national Just Label It Campaign, after Vilsack spoke publicly about the idea early last year.

Those differences have brought the issue to an impasse, for now.

Congress is still trying to find common ground. Senate Agriculture Committee Chairman Pat Roberts, R-Kan., says he wants to take up a bill soon, before Vermont's law goes into effect. The panel's top Democrat, Debbie Stabenow of Michigan, and Republican Sen. John Hoeven of [North Dakota](#) have been working to find bipartisan compromise.

"We're not there yet," Hoeven said earlier this month.

COMPANIES GO ON THEIR OWN

As Congress has stalled on the issue, some companies are already prepared to deal with the Vermont law.

Campbell Soup said earlier this month it now supports mandatory national labeling for products containing genetically modified ingredients, and that it will stop backing efforts opposing the disclosures.

The company said about three-quarters of its products contain GMOs, and released a mock-up of the label it would use to comply if Vermont's law goes into effect. It says "Partially produced with genetic engineering" in small print at the bottom.

Campbell Soup CEO Denise Morrison has been outspoken about the need for big food makers to adapt to changing tastes.

One person died and three others were injured after a construction crane fell in downtown Manhattan this morning.

The crane, which fell around 8:25 a.m., toppled parked cars on Worth Street in the Tribeca neighborhood.

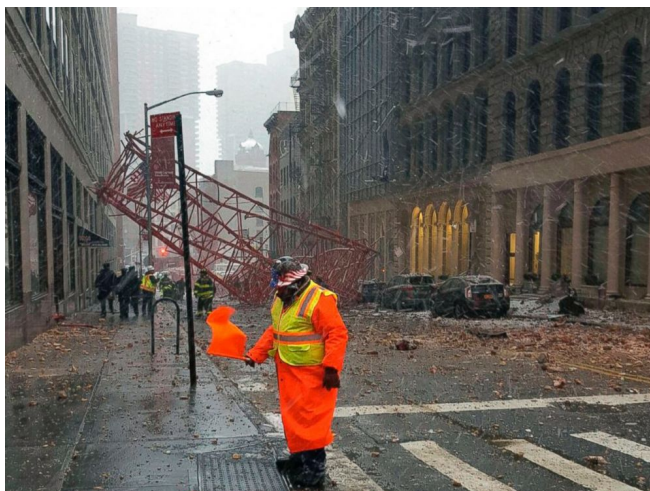
One person was pulled from a crushed vehicle, ABC owned station WABC reported. New York City's Office of Emergency Management said three individuals were injured in the crash, two seriously. A fourth individual was killed. None of the injuries are life threatening.

New York City Mayor [Bill de Blasio](#) said in a press conference this morning that a full police investigation was underway. He said this was the first crane collapse in the city since 2008.

"This is a very sad incident. Thank God it was not worse," the mayor said. "Our hearts go out to the family of the individual who was lost."

De Blasio said the crawler crane collapsed as it was being "lowered into a safe and secure position." The manufacturer of the crane requires that the crane be moved into a "secure position" if winds top more than 20 miles per hour, according to de Blasio. New York City is currently experiencing a winter storm with wind gusts in the 20 mile per hour range. The crane had been inspected as of 6:20 a.m.

The mayor noted that FDNY officers and personnel of utility company [Con Ed](#) are sweeping nearby buildings in search of gas links after gas odors were reported in the area. Gas has been temporarily turned off in most buildings in the area as a precaution, de Blasio said.



Paul Leys/AP Photo

The force of the collapse also caused a water main break at Worth Street and West Broadway.

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