

## STRAY THOUGHTS

# People deserve to know about their food

By Randy Evans

I've spent most of my adult life advocating for the free flow of information.

As a young newspaper reporter, I would sometimes need to remind government officials who were hesitant to provide documents I was seeking that the public has a right to know. Later, as a newspaper editor and now as executive director of the Iowa Freedom of Information Council, I've pushed and prodded government officials over this — sometimes to the point of angering them.

I have long believed that secrecy rarely serves the public's best interests.

The public is entitled to know how their taxes are spent. They are entitled to know who is financing the campaigns of people seeking elected office. They are entitled to know what health inspectors find after testing the drinking water and air in communities.

And the public should be able to readily know what goes into the foods they are eating and feeding to their children.

That's the reason legislation under consideration in Congress for more than a year should be getting greater attention from the American people. The law will affect how easily — or difficult — it will be for the people to learn about what is in foods.

The legislation in Congress was prompted by a new law that took effect July 1 in Vermont. The law requires food companies to clearly label whether GMOs — short for genetically modified organisms — are going into foods offered for sale in Vermont supermarkets.

There's an ongoing debate nationally over GMOs and whether the result of genetic engineering is, or is not, safe for people to eat.

Some activists are convinced that

GMOs are harming people's health by contributing to rising rates of some diseases. But 100 Nobel laureates have urged an end to opposition to GMOs, citing the value genetic engineering has in the world's food supply.

I'm not persuaded one way or the other so far. But I don't doubt for a minute that people are entitled to know whether genetically engineered ingredients are in a particular food product. About three-fourths of the processed foods sold in the United States have genetically engineered ingredients, according to the Center for Food Safety.

Not surprisingly, the nation's food companies don't want to deal with different labeling requirements in each of the 50 states. But two competing approaches now in front of Congress are not the solution consumers should want, either.

The House has approved legislation that simply prevents individual states from enacting their own labeling laws.

The Senate is expected to vote this week on legislation that would block Vermont and other states from enforcing their own food labeling laws. The Senate bill would require food companies to disclose which products contain genetically modified ingredients.

But my blood pressure is rising over how the Senate would allow companies to meet that requirement.

The legislation would allow food companies to make the disclosure in a variety of ways — from straight forward text on food packaging, or by putting a QR code (those funky square symbols that can be "read" by smart phones) on packages, or by directing consumers to a telephone number or website to get GMO information.

Do senators really think a QR code is a meaningful solution — especially for the one-third of Americans who do not have smart phones? Or that forcing consumers to wait until they get home,

after buying a product, is truly helpful?

The best solution would be to require food companies to include on their relevant packages the words "Contains genetically engineered ingredients," along with a phone number or website where consumers can get further details.

The American Farm Bureau Federation thinks the Senate bill goes too far. The organization wants GMO labeling to be strictly voluntary.

We've been through this food labeling mess before. A decade ago, agribusiness companies like Monsanto and some so-called government regulators tried to stop dairy companies from including on their milk jugs the words "No artificial hormones used." The owners of Oakhurst Dairy in Portland, Maine, said at the time, "We're in the business of marketing milk, not Monsanto's drugs."

Gary Hirshberg, an organic yogurt producer in New Hampshire and chairman of the Just Label It campaign, objects to some terms in the U.S. Senate food bill. He is disappointed that companies would be allowed to comply with GMO disclosure by forcing consumers to have a smart phone.

"This proposal falls short of what consumers rightly expect — a simple, at-a-glance disclosure on the package," he told National Public Radio.

U.S. Rep. Rick Nolan, a Minnesota Democrat, has a similar view: "The issue isn't whether GMO foods are healthy or safe. It's about the right to know what's in the food we buy for ourselves and our families. This is a serious problem begging for a solution."

From my perch, the solution is simple: more information. Just label it.

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