



01-12-09

At Farm Bureau: Biotech speaker blasts 'GE-free' labels

By Agri-Pulse Staff

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Despite apparent consumer preference, the biotechnology industry remains firmly opposed to labeling food products as “biotech-free” or “genetically engineered-free.” Such labels reinforce the false idea with consumers that biotech food products are inferior or pose a health threat, says Bill Olson, director of federal government affairs for the Biotechnology Industry Organization (BIO). He was speaking to Farm Bureau members in an issues conference at the American Farm Bureau Federation’s 90th annual meeting in San Antonio, Texas.

“A non-GE label leads consumers to believe there is a difference between GE products and those produced by traditional methods. There is no difference,” Olson emphasized. All biotech food products on the market have gone through a rigorous regulatory process that ensures they are safe for humans, animals and the environment.

The Food and Drug Administration requires that nutrition information appear on most foods, and any claims on food products must be truthful and not misleading. Special labels are not required for biotech products. Labels identifying food as biotech- or GE-free are allowed, which frustrates BIO because the group believes such labels are misleading.

“The labeling debate last year focused on biotech and cloned animals – two distinct things,” Olson said. None of the bills introduced in Congress or state legislatures in 2008 became law, and while the new Congress and incoming administration have other priorities, Olson expects the issue to resurface.

He said the biotech industry is optimistic that as consumers more fully grasp the benefits of biotechnology, such as producing drought- and cold-tolerant crops and minimizing the environmental impact of farming, they will embrace the technology. Ultimately, it will come down to what must be done to feed, clothe and fuel a booming global population. The number of people in the world is increasing, but the amount of crop and grazing land is not.

“The food labeling debate will continue, but we believe science is on our side and American agriculture must continue to meet the needs of an ever-expanding population,” Olson said. “Food security will come through scientific and technological advances.”

He also noted that studies have shown that while consumers may say they prefer food to be labeled according to whether it was produced with biotechnology or not, that does not translate into action at the retail level.

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