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Anti-biotech rally overshadowed by 'occupy Washington' protests

Just more than 200 organic and natural food enthusiasts turned out Sunday afternoon in Lafayette Square, across the street from the White House, to hear an afternoon-long appeal for mandatory labeling of food with ingredients produced through biotechnology. As protests go, it was an upbeat gathering with little of the drama or the numbers of the –occupy Washington encampments elsewhere in the city that protest uneven distribution of wealth and income.

The anti-biotech event capped a 16-day –march from New York City that drew about 50 people at each of several stops along the route, said Ariel Vegosen, a spokesperson for the –Right2KnowMarch organizers who provided the –more than 200 crowd estimate.



Advocates of mandatory labeling of biotech products make their case across from the White House this past weekend. Photo: Agri-Pulse

Notwithstanding the modest attendance, the affair drew many of the luminaries of the global organic and anti-biotechnology movements., including long-time Indian activist Vandana Shiva; Germany's Joseph Wilhelm, who organized similar marches in Europe to urge stricter controls on and labeling of food and feed derived from biotechnology, and Maria Rodale of the Rodale Institute, an organic pioneer. Elizabeth Kucinich, director of public affairs for the Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine, urged support for legislation introduced by her husband, Rep. Dennis Kucinich, D-Ohio, to require labels on all biotech-containing foods.

George Siemon, CEO of the cooperative behind Organic Valley milk and dairy products, expressed optimism that –moral and ethical issues surrounding biotechnology would become more prominent. –The churches are just starting to wake up to these issues,‑ he said. Theresa Marquez, the co-op’s chief marketing officer, acknowledged that the movement needed to expand. **“We’re the fringe of the fringe,”** she told the crowd.

Organizers said they hoped to call attention to President Obama’s 2007 promise, made during his campaign for the Democratic presidential nomination, to **“let folks know when their food is genetically modified, because Americans have a right to know what they're buying.”** Many of the event’s sponsors signed a petition filed earlier this month asking the Food and Drug Administration to require biotech labeling and some are active in a petition drive in California seeking a November 2012 ballot initiative to require biotech labels in the state.