

CONSUMERS' ASSOCIATION OF CANADA

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Consumers' Association of Canada

- Founded in 1947 - 53 Years old and 3rd oldest consumer group in the world
- Member of Consumers' International - all policies based on the international bill of consumer rights
- Voluntary organization - all policy set by consultation with volunteers and delivered by volunteers

Structure

- National office in Ottawa - administrative and research function for National Board and National Issues Committees
- National Board - 8 members, all volunteers
- President and CEO, VP Issues and Policy, Treasurer, Secretary, Representative of the Provincial Council and 3 members at large.

Structure - cont'd

- Provincial Council - one representative from each provincial and territorial association.
- Policy Advisory Committee - Chairs of all Issues committees, one representative from Provincial Council and one of the 3 members at large from National Board. Reports back to Board through VP Issues and Policy who acts as Chair

Process

- Issues priorities are set by the volunteers at the AGM
- Food and Health always top two
- Others include Energy, Environment, Telecommunications, Financial Services, Standards, Electronic Commerce, Trade
- Other issues dealt with on an ad-hoc basis as they arise - EG: Recent Airline Merger

Food Committee

- Second priority committee this year
- Very large committee with representation from all provinces
- Has a number of sub-committees to deal with specific issues - EG: Codex
- Several joint sub-committees to deal with horizontal issues - EG: Nutraceuticals, Biotechnology

Biotech Task Force

- A joint task force - members of food and health committees
- Representation from all provinces
- Been studying issue and making policy statements on biotech since 1988
- Lots of expertise on committee, as well as grass-roots volunteers

Key Work on Biotech

- Development of booklet “A Growing Appetite for Information” with Food Biotechnology Communications Network
- Series of 6 focus groups across the country examine how consumers access and assess information on food biotech
- Work on numerous government and multi-stakeholder committees examining various aspects of this issue.

Key Work on Biotech - cont'd

- Numerous presentations on this topic given by many members of the task force to present our positions and help inform the public on the science and the scientists on the public perceptions
- Participation in the Canadian General Standards Board committee to devise a voluntary labelling scheme for Food derived from and not derived from biotechnology

CAC Position on Biotech

- Neither blanket support nor blanket opposition
- Recognize possibility for future consumer benefits
- Concern that current food applications do not have clear benefits for consumers
- Believe there is a shortage of long-term tests available to examine possible human health and environmental risk

Cont'd

- Do not believe that labelling is a reasonable alternative to safety
- Recognize the need for consumer information but concerned that this information be meaningful and accurate
- Recognize that many consumer concerns are based on ethical or socio-economic concerns and cannot be answered by science

CAC on Labelling of GM Food

- All labelling should be based on a solid set of principles, including:
 - Accurate and not misleading
 - substantiated and verified
 - unlikely to result in misinterpretation
 - not based on the absence or ingredients or features which have never been associated with the product category

CAC on Labelling/2

- A logo is inadequate for the labelling of GM food
- A “may contain” label does not help either consumer or manufacturer
- It is unlikely that a label will be able to convey adequate information, additional communication methods will be needed

Concerns about current schemes

- Allow unrestricted use of terms such as “GM free” thus providing an opportunity for enormous consumer fraud.
- Only deal with one technology used for genetic modification (rDNA) - other technologies slip through
- Do not deal with products derived from GM plants but that do not actually contain GM protein - EG:corn syrup, canola oil

Concerns about current schemes/2

- Do not appear to be designed in a way that will enable them to protect consumers from exaggerated claims when products with clear consumer benefits enter the market

Positions taken in CGSB Process

- Voluntary standard must be based on a solid set of principles
- Standard must be written to deal with misleading negative claims now (GM Free) and also manage exaggerated positive claims in the future

Positions taken at CGSB/2

- Standard must deal with food derived from GM plants as well as that which contains GM material but not be so broad as to become unusable
- The standard must be written in such a way as to be useful for a number of years, despite possible development of new technologies

Definition

- Definition must include all GM technologies that fall under Canada's Novel Food regulatory process

Consensus point

- We have, at this point, agreed to the use of the narrow definition for positive claims
- Use of the Canada's Novel Food definition for negative claims still critical to CAC

Containing/Derived from

- To only label food containing GM protein is to ignore consumers ethical and environmental concerns
- This type of labelling is dependent for verification on a very expensive and highly unreliable scientific test - recent UK reports show a 40% error rate in these tests

Containing/Derived from/2

- Use of “derived from” in GM labelling would make such labels far less misleading for consumers
- Using “derived from” labels would force development of an audit trail scheme for verification. This would result in better verification for products containing GM
- Use of both terms would create a more level marketplace for the agri-food sector

Consensus points

- CAC has agreed that it would not be feasible to label food that is several steps removed from the GM material - such as meat from animals that may have received GM feed

Conclusions

- If the CGSB process is successful and achieves a voluntary standard to which all stakeholders can sign-on, CAC will request the minister to reference the standard by requiring all who make claims, positive or negative, to conform to the standard
- We have not determined our position should the CGSB process fail