

What Should Accurate Food Labeling Include?

Food labeling is primarily a means of consumer protection. Recently, the attention to food labeling has exploded over concerns related to nutrition, genetic modification, pesticide and/or additive use, identification of known allergens, product origin disclosure and tracking of products with respect to recalls and more.

The US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) makes regulations to ensure the safety of domestically consumed foods which are produced both domestically and internationally. Food safety and labeling requirements are regulated by the Federal Food, Drug and Cosmetic Act (FFDCA) and the Fair Packaging and Labeling Act which require a standard nutrition labeling system for all foods other than meats and poultry-- approximately 80% of food sold in the US. The FDA does not pre-approve producers' food labels; rather they establish requirements and guidance for mandated food label attributes.

The US Department of Agriculture (USDA) is responsible for inspections and quality standards for meat and poultry. Unlike the FDA, the Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) mandates that all labels used for meat and poultry receive pre-approval before they can be used.

As the public becomes more knowledgeable via the internet, and if public demand for more accuracy and transparency in food labeling, and increased oversight continue, then the FDA and USDA may have to respond to political pressure for more inspections, and the inclusion of more scientifically based information on food labels. These changes would require more funding for both the FDA and USDA in order to increase the number of trained scientists and supporting staff.

"An important element of food safety policy is the education of consumers about safe food handling, storage, and preparation practices. Policymakers also use information to influence safe production practices. Labeling and education programs are both used to influence consumer and producer behavior." (USDA website)

A driving force behind modern food labeling concerns has been the health industry. As food science has progressed, food choices and consumption quantity have been recognized as key factors in public health. Obesity, heart disease, and diabetes are just a few of the diseases associated with modern eating habits. Health professionals have determined that educating the public on their choices and reducing confusion with regard to food labels is integral to stemming this threat to American health and the economy. There is, however, substantial debate as to what information is appropriate and what method to communicate best serves these interests. 1*

There is consumer/industry conflict. Opponents of more labeling don't want to add more costs to the small farmer who may pass the cost on to customers. Elected government officials want to keep or propose rules that benefit their local farm constituents. There is much state to state disagreement on basic disclosure rules. For example, opponents of more labeling fear that labeling GMOs will stigmatize a food source. Given international trade, it is indeed a worldwide issue: what kind and how much of an ingredient has to be disclosed. The US and Australia, EU, and Japan have very different standards.

Californians voted down Prop 37 in 2012, but the controversies surrounding labeling GMOs and other technologies are not going away.

Consensus question 9 asks *your opinion* on the adequacy of *current* food labeling.

Consensus question 10 asks what the government should achieve with respect to marketing and ingredient claims on food labels. This will be your chance to state other policies that would be important for you.

Most controversial at this time are differences of opinion concerning newer technology, specifically Nanoscience. Nanoscience is the study of phenomena and manipulation of materials at atomic, molecular, and macromolecular scales where properties differ significantly from those on a larger scale. As of October 2013, a final United States regulatory policy on Nanotechnology has not been developed, and both industry and the public are concerned. Unless you are well versed in the science of food technologies some of the labeling won't mean much; however, some experts claim that consumers want disclosure and are more likely to accept a product/ingredient if it is adequately labeled even if they don't completely understand how it is made.

Consensus question 11 *"Recognizing that each food developed using any new technology can be unique, and assuming that required food labeling should be useful to consumers, should the following generalized information relating to how products or components are developed be presented on food labels? (All these questions also assume some percentage threshold of new technology ingredients, such as the 0.9% used in the European Union.)*

a) Contains ingredients developed using any new technology stating which technologies are involved (Not Recommended, Voluntary, Mandatory.)

*b) Does **not** contain ingredients developed using any new technology (Not Recommended, Voluntary, Mandatory.)*

c) If meat, fish, eggs, or dairy products are from animals that have consumed feed developed using any new technology stating which technologies are involved (Not Recommended, Voluntary, Mandatory.)"

1* Most of this information was derived from articles on the LWVUS website for the Agriculture Update. Other information was found on the USDA and FDA websites.

The most helpful and extensive League article regarding food labeling comes from: <http://www.lwv.org/content/food-labeling-fda-and-usda>

