

# Bill Would Require Labels on Genetically Engineered Seeds

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ALBANY, N.Y. – Lawmakers in Albany want New Yorkers to know not just what they're eating, but what they're planting as well.

A bill introduced in the Legislature would require the labeling of all seeds that include genetically modified organisms, or GMOs.

Organic farmers fear having their crops tainted from birds, insects or wind that could transmit pollen from GMO crops while many consumers fear there isn't enough information available on the long-range consequences of eating genetically modified foods or on their environmental impacts.

"Organic food is considered healthy because it's natural. The one thing genetically modified food is not is natural," said Sarah Johnston, executive director of the Northeast Organic Farming Association of New York, which represents 650 farms. "Farmers are in some cases purchasing genetically modified seeds unbeknownst to them. At the very least, people need to know what they are purchasing."

The measure, one of several bills around the country relating to genetically modified crops, is backed by the New York Farm Bureau and the Northeast Organic Farming Association of New York.

Democratic Assemblyman Peter Rivera, a sponsor of the bill, said that since GMO crops are patented, farmers also fear they could be sued for patent infringement. Republican state Sen.

James Seward is sponsoring the bill in the Senate.

"Really there has not been enough testing done on the effects genetically modified crops have on people, the environment and animals," said Maureen Knapp, whose family owns an organic dairy farm in Preble, about 20 miles south of Syracuse. "We grow crops to feed our animals and we do have conventional farmers all around us growing (pesticide resistant) corn. It's scary."

According to the Organic Farming Research Foundation, about 2 percent of the U.S. food supply is grown organically. Sales of organic products have shown an annual increase of at least 20 percent, the fastest growing sector of agriculture, the organization reported. The growth has come even though organic foods cost more to produce than conventional crops.

"The organic movement has grown tremendously because of consumer demand," said John Bunting, a grass-based dairy farmer in Delaware County. Organic farmers "want to guarantee to the consumer that they are in no way involved in GMOs."

To get their organic certification, farmers are required to use organic seed and required to make sure their vegetable crops aren't contaminated with GMOs.

Genetic technology has been widely used by major seed companies such as Monsanto Co. to promote insect resistance or herbicide tolerance in crops. About 80 percent of the U.S. soybean crop and 50 percent of the

corn crop is genetically modified, said Michael Fernandez, executive director of the Pew Initiative on Food and Biotechnology.

A 2004 study by the initiative found that state legislatures are increasingly debating issues surrounding biotechnology's use in agriculture.

The number of bills and resolutions introduced by state legislators nationwide addressing biotechnology and farming rose 7 percent to 130 in 2003 from 121 in 2001, according to the study.

Rivera is also sponsoring a bill that would make manufacturers of genetically engineered plants and seeds liable for damages caused as a result of cross-contaminating crops, seeds or plants, including wild plants. A similar bill is now being considered in Vermont.

In Hawaii, the Legislature is debating a bill to require companies to make public disclosures of locations of crop fields and test sites of genetically modified crops and to specify the types of genetic tests conducted.

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## On the Net:

Pew Initiative on Food and Biotechnology: <http://pewagbiotech.org/>

Northeast Organic Farming Association of New York: <http://nofany.org/index.html>