

## INTERNATIONAL FOOD SAFETY BODY DISCUSSES THE LABELING OF GMO FOODS

By: Gabriela C. Flora, May 16, 1999

As concerns about the health risks, environmental consequences and ethical implications of genetically modified organisms (GMOs) increase, the labeling of foods containing GMOs gains prominence in the international food safety and trade standards arena. The Codex Alimentarius Food Labeling Committee (CCFL) debated international recommendations for the labeling of foods derived through biotechnology during their 27<sup>th</sup> annual meeting in Ottawa, Canada, April 27-30.

Founded in 1962 by the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization and World Health Organization, Codex Alimentarius establishes international food standards and guidelines with the objectives of insuring food safety and facilitating international food trade. The CCFL is one of eight general subject Codex committees. The 164-country member organization is shifting from providing optional guidelines on food safety to being a dispute settlement arm of the World Trade Organization.

Backed by corporate biotechnology interests, the United States is opposed to the labeling of foods containing GMOs unless they "differ significantly in regards to composition, nutritional value or intended use." Claiming that there is no scientific basis for across the board labeling of GMOs, the US attempts to bolster their claim that European restrictions on the importation of foods containing GMOs is a technical barrier to trade. Although the segregation of "designer crops" is common place, both the US and an international industry group cited the difficulty to segregate in their arguments against labeling.

The only country to support the US in its opposition to the labeling of foods obtained through biotechnology was Argentina. New Zealand and Australia, who had allied themselves with the US position last year, came out in support of GMO labeling. Canada also retreated support for the US position.

While the European Union was the largest force supporting mandatory labeling, a number of non-European countries, including Japan, Brazil, New Zealand and Australia, highlighted the support in their countries for the labeling of genetically modified foods. The precautionary principle is utilized in Norway for approving the marketing of GMOs. Norway strongly supports the labeling of all GMOs and highlighted the fact that there are many reasons GMOs need to be labeled. The Norway delegate said, "we have to accept that consumers have other interests besides just safety when buying food. They want to use their power as consumers to support products produced through means they ethically believe in" and labeling is required to do this. By not labeling GMOs consumers are being told their choice is not important.

The "Recommendation for the Labeling of Foods Obtained through Biotechnology" was held at Step 3 in the 8 step Codex Committee process. A working group comprised of 23 countries and several international NGOs and industry groups was established to further develop and clarify labeling criteria for foods derived through biotechnology with the objective of moving the improved recommendations to Step 5 at the CCFL 2000 meetings.

The 1999 CCFL debate over the labeling of foods obtained through biotechnology exemplifies that more and more countries are debating the safety of GMOs, listening to consumer demands and establishing labeling requirement. The US is becoming more isolated in its opposition to the labeling of GMOs.