Lawmakers to review genetically modified labeling

19.12.2014 - The food industry is likely to find a more receptive Congress come January in its fight against mandatory labeling of genetically modified foods.

Setting the stage for debate after Republicans take control, a House subcommittee on Wednesday was to review legislation that would make such food labels voluntary, overriding any state laws that require them. The bill, introduced by Rep. Mike Pompeo, is supported by the food industry, which has said labels would mislead consumers into thinking that engineered ingredients are unsafe.

The Food and Drug Administration typically has shied away from the subject, leaving the issue of labeling the genetically modified organisms - foods grown from seeds engineered in labs - to the states. But Congress has weighed in as the food industry has faced a potential patchwork of state laws requiring the labeling and the issue of GMOs has also been a sticking point in trade talks between the U.S. and Europe.

Vermont became the first state to require the labels this year, passing a law in May that will take effect mid-2016 if it survives legal challenges. Maine and Connecticut passed laws before Vermont, but those measures don’t take effect unless neighboring states follow suit. Ballot initiatives that would have required labeling were narrowly defeated in California and Washington in the past two years, and an Oregon initiative on the ballot this year is in the midst of a recount.

Currently, the FDA says labeling of genetically modified foods isn't needed because the nutritional content is the same as non-GMO varieties. (The "O" stands for "organism.") The agency has a safety review process for GMO crops but it isn't required.

Genetically modified seeds are engineered to have certain traits, like resistance to herbicides or certain plant diseases. While there is little scientific evidence showing they are unsafe, some food advocates have pushed to label them, saying there is too much unknown about the effects of the technology.

The majority of the country’s corn and soybean crop is now genetically modified, with much of that going to animal feed. Modified corn and soybeans are also made into popular processed food ingredients like corn oil, corn starch, high-fructose corn syrup and soybean oil.

In testimony released by the committee in advance of the hearing, Scott Faber, head of the national Just Label It campaign, says consumers want to know what they are buying and how the food was produced. He said advocates are not seeking a warning label, but a “modest disclosure” on the back of all food packages that contain GMO ingredients.

“Because our food choices dramatically shape our lives, unprecedented consumer interest in food is
a trend that should be welcomed, not frustrated," Faber said in the prepared remarks. (dpa)