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Idaho House panel supports federal policy for GMO labeling

By SEAN ELLIS
Capital Press

BOISE — A joint memorial from the Idaho Legislature to Congress urging the federal government to create a national policy for the labeling of genetically engineered foods has passed a House committee.

The memorial asks Congress to have the Food and Drug Administration create federal standards for companies that want to voluntarily label food products that do not contain genetically engineered ingredients.

This would accommodate both those who want to label their food products as not having GE ingredients and those who don't, its author, Rep. Steven Miller, a Republican farmer from Fairfield, told members of the House Agricultural Affairs Committee.

"I think it's a good compromise that way in allowing both sides of the issue to find some middle ground," he said. "It meets the needs of both sides."

The memorial says that foods produced with GE ingredients "are as safe to eat and grow as foods produced

without GE ingredients" and adds that "GE technology adds desirable traits from nature, establishing the potential for nutritional, health, agronomic and environmental benefits."

It still needs to be approved by the full House and Senate.

The memorial is supported by most of the state's largest agricultural groups and was also vetted by national farm organizations, said Doug Jones, an Idaho farmer who is executive director of Growers for Biotechnology.

Jones said it's better to have the federal government

develop labeling standards for GE foods rather than states or cities.

The memorial says a patchwork of local and state mandatory labeling laws would result in costly changes to manufacturing, labeling, warehousing, inventory and distribution channels that would result in higher food prices.

"There's a common-sense business reason not to do it state-by-state," Jones said. "If we're going to have labeling, let's do it right, at the federal level with common standards."

"It's better to have one national policy rather than 50 individual ones," said Brent Olmstead, executive director of Milk Producers of Idaho, which supports the memorial.

An effort by Idaho's sugar beet industry to introduce a bill that would have made it Idaho law to recognize federal pre-emption on the issue of GE labeling will not happen this year, said Rupert farmer Duane Grant, chairman of the Snake River Sugar Co-op.

That bill would have prevented individual Idaho counties from passing GE labeling laws.

Grant said Idaho's sug-

ar industry would have preferred the pre-emption bill but he said the memorial is "well-written and ... it will take us a long ways down the road we want to go."

Miller said a key point of the memorial is that it asks FDA to create standards for voluntary labeling of GE products.

"You're not required to label," he said. "The market will work this out."

Florida has passed a similar memorial, North Dakota is in the process and several other states are discussing it, Miller said.



Submitted photo

Members of the Idaho Organization of Resource Councils hold an educational event at Idaho's Capitol Feb. 3 in support of the state's cottage food industry. IORC is supporting legislation that would set standards and guidelines for people who sell food produced in home kitchens.

Bill sets guidelines, standards for cottage food industry

By SEAN ELLIS
Capital Press

BOISE — The Idaho Legislature will consider legislation that would set standards for the state's cottage food industry and allow people to sell limited amounts of food produced in an unlicensed home kitchen operation directly to the public.

Idaho Code doesn't specifically address the industry and the state's seven health districts have independently set their own standards for food produced in home kitchens, said Boise farmer Josie Erskine.

For example, a farmer who produces jam at home might be able to sell it at the Sun Valley farmers' market but not at the Weiser market, said Erskine, who supports the legislation.

Erskine said the bill would bring consistency to the industry and she believes it has the potential to help a lot of small and medium-sized farmers.

"Out of all the bills coming out of this year's legislative session, I really believe this bill has the potential to create the most new small businesses in Idaho," she said.

Members of the House Health and Welfare Committee voted to print the bill Feb. 24.

"We're just trying to put some certainty into (the industry) so people who want to be in this business can have some guidelines," said the bill's sponsor, Rep. Clark Kauffman, a Republican farmer from Filer.

Kauffman pulled the bill earlier in the session after it faced concerns from the Northwest Food Processors Association, which represents 76 food processors and 348 suppliers in Idaho, Oregon

and Washington.

NFPA representative Elizabeth Criner said the group wanted to see more standards included in the legislation to protect public safety.

Those concerns were echoed by other groups representing Idaho agriculture.

If someone got sick from eating a food product produced in a home kitchen, it would reflect poorly on the entire agricultural industry, said Milk Producers of Idaho Executive Director Brent Olmstead.

"We just want to make sure the food's safe," he said. "Agriculture wants people to eat safe food."

Working with NFPA, Kauffman added a labeling provision that requires cottage food products to list any potential allergens and contact information of the person who produced it.

While there is no licensing or in-home inspection requirements for cottage food producers in the bill, they will have to register with their local health district.

If there is a complaint about a cottage food product or an illness outbreak, state regulators would have the right to inspect the operation.

The legislation would apply only to non-potentially hazardous foods, which are defined in the statute.

The new bill also includes a cap of \$30,000 in gross sales.

Cottage food producers wanted a higher cap, while NFPA, which supports the new bill, wanted to include in-home inspections.

Kauffman said the cap was necessary to get NFPA's support and the guidelines can always be changed in the future if the industry can prove they need to be.

Upper Snake recharge expands, despite dry month

By JOHN O'CONNELL
Capital Press

IDAHO FALLS, Idaho — The Bureau of Reclamation is expanding winter aquifer recharge in the Upper Snake River system, though the watershed's once strong snowpack has dropped to near normal levels due to continued dry weather in February.

Lack of precipitation for consecutive months has pushed other Idaho basins further below average.

Due to an ample carryover of storage water, however, even an average snowpack has necessitated that BOR increase flows below Palisades Reservoir from 900 cubic feet per second a month ago to present levels of 2,700 cubic feet per second to free storage space for spring runoff.

Seeking to put those flood-control releases to good use, BOR recently approved a request by canal companies to temporarily suspend its winter water savings contract. The provision requires canal companies that



Courtesy of Idaho Department of Water Resources

Water is recharged this winter at American Falls Reservoir District No. 2's Millepost 31 recharge site. Winter recharge has recently been expanded to include canals between American Falls and Palisades reservoirs.

draw water from Palisades to shut off for 150 days through winter in order to build up storage.

Steve Howser, manager of Aberdeen-Springfield Canal Co., and other water managers requested the suspension in order to conduct aquifer recharge without fear of violating the policy. Howser commenced with recharging 170 cubic feet per

second on Feb. 21, immediately following the suspension.

The state, which holds a 1,200 cubic feet per second recharge water right, pays canal companies fees to allow water to seep into the aquifer through their unlined systems, or to spill it into aquifer injection facilities.

Howser hasn't run water through his system during win-

ter since the 1960s, prior to the implementation of the winter water savings contract.

"Here we are in a situation in February where we have almost perfect conditions to accomplish some recharge," said Howser, who runs recharge water 30 miles through his canal until it's released into an operational spill facility.

Lyle Swank, watermaster over the Upper Snake district, said a half dozen larger canal companies on the Henry's Fork above Palisades and below the reservoir, including the Great Feeder Canals near Ririe, are participating in expanded recharge.

Swank plans to send his staff to verify canal companies are accurately reporting their recharge diversions.

Idaho Department of Water Resources Water Planning Bureau manager Brian Patton said 50,670 acre-feet has already been recharged this winter by canal companies drawing from Milner Reservoir, and not covered by the winter storage contract.

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