

Bioengineered food rules draw criticism

By CAROL RYAN DUMAS
Capital Press

While farm groups are pleased with USDA's new disclosure standard for bioengineered foods, others are not.

Some public interest and environmental advocacy groups contend the standard is deceptive and doesn't go far enough to identify genetically modified foods and inform consumers.

They take issue with the term "bioengineered," the permitted methods of disclosure and the omission of foods they say should be labeled as genetically modified.

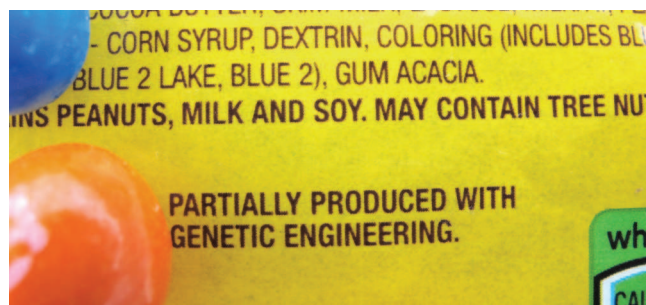
"This deceptive rule will keep people in the dark about what they're eating and feeding their families," Wenonah Hauter, director of

Food & Water Watch, said in a statement.

"It is meant to confuse consumers, not inform them. This deception is a tool being utilized to maximize corporate profits, plain and simple, she said.

The use of "bioengineered," rather than GMOs, is a deceptive strategy because consumers don't know what that means. In addition, the use of digital codes and other technology makes GMO disclosure more difficult for consumers, and the definitions of what triggers labeling are far too limited, she said.

Options for disclosure include text, symbol, electronic or digital link, text message and a phone number or web address where consumers can access information.



Lisa Rathke/Associated Press File

In this 2016 photo, a disclosure statement is displayed on a package of Peanut M&M's candy in Montpelier, Vt., saying they are "Partially produced with genetic engineering." A lawsuit between Vermont and grocery manufacturers was dropped because the state law was pre-empted by a new federal label law that has sparked a new debate among critics.

The standard does not apply to foods such as meat, milk and eggs derived from animals fed forage or grain developed through biotechnology. It also does not apply to highly refined

products such as sugar or oil derived from biotech crops.

The Environmental Working Group said the disclosure rule fails to meet the intent of Congress to create a mandatory disclo-

sure standard that includes all genetically engineered foods and to use terms consumers understand.

It also fails to address the needs of consumers who don't have expensive phones or who live in rural places with poor cell service, EWG said.

"The Trump administration has yet again put the interests of pesticide and biotech companies ahead of the interests of ordinary Americans," Scott Faber, EWG senior vice president of government affairs, said in a statement.

In addition to using the unfamiliar "bioengineered" term, allowing the use of barcodes that require a smartphone and a reliable broadband connection and exempting refined products, the threshold for the unin-

tended presence of genetically engineered ingredients is far too high, the Center for Food Safety contends.

At 5 percent, that threshold is more than five times the European Union's 0.9 percent standard. The majority of genetically engineered foods would not be labeled as a result of the exemption for highly refined products and the 5 percent threshold, CFS said.

"The USDA has betrayed the public trust by denying Americans the right to know how their food is produced," Andrew Kimball, CFS executive director said.

"Instead of providing clarity and transparency, they have created large-scale confusion and uncertainty for consumers, food producers and retailers," he said.

Stennes succeeds Collins at Chelan Fruit

By DAN WHEAT
Capital Press

CHELAN, Wash. — Mark Stennes, a fourth-generation Methow Valley grower, has been appointed interim chief executive officer of Chelan Fruit Cooperative, effective Jan. 1.

Stennes, 37, succeeds Reggie Collins, who has been CEO since 2004. Collins will take an advisory role with the co-op and Chelan Fresh Marketing on business and strategic opportunities.



Mark Stennes

Stennes joined Chelan Fruit as assistant general manager on April 2017 and became a member of the Washington Apple Commission in May of 2017. His identical twin brother, Kevin, joined Chelan Fresh Marketing in 2013 and is organic sales manager.

Their father, Keith Stennes, operates the 400-acre family orchard in Methow that was started by his grandfather, Britanus Stennes, in 1903. Keith and his wife, Deb, and their sons, their wives and children all live on the family orchard.

Mark Stennes holds an undergraduate degree in horticulture from Wenatchee Valley College,



Dan Wheat/Capital Press File

Workers sort Gala apples at Chelan Fruit Cooperative, Chelan, Wash. Mark Stennes is the co-op's new interim CEO.

a bachelor's in business administration from Central Washington University and a master's in business administration from Boise State University.

He managed the family orchard before working for Chelan Fruit. Stennes Orchards has been a member of the co-op since the

1920s, when Britanus founded Methow Pateros Growers.

Chelan Fruit is a 270-member grower-owned cooperative in Chelan. Each year, it packs about 7 million boxes of apples and pears and 1.5 million boxes of cherries. The fruit is sold by Chelan Fresh.

Chelan Fruit employs about 800 people year-round and 1,100 to 1,200 during cherry harvest.

Chelan Fruit was formed by the merger of Trout-Blue Chelan and the Brewster cooperative MAGI in 2004. The merger was one of the first projects Reggie Collins led as CEO. Collins also

was instrumental in the creation of Chelan Fresh Marketing as the sales desk for Chelan Fruit and Gebbers Farms.

More recently, Collins oversaw the \$85 million rebuild of Chelan Fruit's main apple packing plant, which was destroyed by wildfire in 2015.

"The board appreciates the tremendous progress the co-op has made under Reggie's leadership and we look forward to building on this progress with Mark as our interim CEO," said Marrian Peebles, Chelan Fruit board chairman.

The board has a strong focus on succession planning and Stennes' selection enables a "seamless transition" in leadership, Peebles said.

Stennes has "demonstrated exceptional leadership" and has the "vision and values" to lead Chelan Fruit into the future, said Dave Robison, Chelan Fruit board vice chairman.

Stennes said he looks forward to driving performance for growers, employees and customers. He said he wants Chelan Fruit to be "a haven and the best option for independent growers."

"The Washington tree fruit industry is changing rapidly but there is a great future ahead for growers of all sizes who change with a changing world," Stennes said.

Groundwater users eye East Snake Plain settlement legislation

By BRAD CARLSON
Capital Press

Idaho Ground Water Appropriators Inc. plans to ask the 2019 Idaho Legislature for additional authority to help it comply with a settlement agreement covering the East Snake Plain Aquifer that lies beneath much of the state's south-central and southeastern regions.

Groundwater users in mid-2015 reached a settlement with a coalition of surface-water users over aquifer usage and related issues. IGWA Executive Director Lynn Tominaga said his group has been working with the Idaho Department of Water Resources on proposed legislation addressing non-compliance among a minority of customers, or patrons, of the groundwater districts.



Lynn Tominaga

Districts determined, based on patrons' water-right priorities, the extent to which each patron must reduce usage to comply with the ESPA settlement agreement. Patrons also can satisfy their share of required water-usage reductions by no longer irrigating some areas.

"There is nothing now in code that allows a ground water district to require a reduction in usage of a patron's water right," Tominaga said. "The only tool the ground water districts have is to assess them the cost to make up for the reduction."

Although the vast majority of districts' water users comply — 90 to 95 percent, he estimated — "by not complying with the mitigation plan, it places a burden on other patrons in the district to pick up that slack, or amount of reduction."

Groundwater districts, after collecting the assessments, buy stored or natural-flow water and return it to the aquifer. Tominaga said this has worked so far, and allowed districts to meet settlement terms, because southern Idaho has had mostly good water years since the agreement was reached.

"There will come a time when we go into a drought period and there is no water to recharge," he said.

Tominaga said IGWA's planned legislation would allow a groundwater district to ask patrons to reduce their water usage based on their proportionate share of water owed to meet the terms of the settlement. If a patron does not, the district could inform the state Department of Water Resources.

Efficiency, marketing could hold key to successful 2019

By BRAD CARLSON
Capital Press

Farmers and ranchers can expect higher input costs and more market and price uncertainty in 2019, but the year could offer some profit opportunities for well-prepared producers, speakers said Dec. 13 at a University of Idaho agricultural outlook seminar in Caldwell.

Ashlee Westerhold, UI extension area economist based in Twin Falls, said producers next year can expect higher interest rates, and increased costs for chemicals, fertilizer, fuel and labor.

On the labor side,



Ashlee Westerhold

Westerhold expects costs to increase by about 4 percent in trucking, 3 percent in general labor and 2 percent among equipment operators in 2019.

Seed, power and custom-farming costs should go largely unchanged, she said. But all input costs should be determined precisely and tracked because they influence the price the producer is willing to accept.

"Minimize your costs to maximize your returns," Westerhold said.

Efficiency gains in many crop sectors have helped producers stay profitable or reduce losses amid mixed prices, speakers said. Onions, a major crop in southwestern Idaho and southeastern Oregon, exemplify the trend toward higher yields per acre.

Gina Greenway, visiting assistant professor of business and accounting at the College of Idaho in Caldwell, cautioned onion growers against "chasing onions as a cash crop."

"Prices are down this year compared to last because of a near-perfect growing season that produced high yields," she said.

Improved technology and irrigation practices have boosted yields. "We are getting better and better at what we do, but it hurts us because there is too much supply on the market," Greenway said.

Lately, a 1 percent-age-point increase in supply drops the price by 2.3 to 2.8 percent, she said.

Prices could rise from 2018 to 2019 on lower supplies, if only because this year's growing conditions were "idyllic," Greenway said.

Demand is strong. U.S. per-capita consumption of onions more than doubled since 1970, she said.

"We need to keep

reminding people that great onions come from Idaho and eastern Oregon," Greenway said. State-of-origin labels, such as those the Idaho potato industry has used successfully, could help.

Onion growers can maintain or increase profitability by knowing their breakeven price, fine-tuning their marketing plans, and managing pests and irrigation needs as efficiently as possible, she said.

Wheat could be a 2019 profit opportunity if producers manage costs, hit protein targets and focus their marketing strategies, said Jon Hogge, UI extension educator in Rexburg.

After 'very busy summer,' WDFW says conflict likely every year

By MATTHEW WEAVER
Capital Press

SPOKANE — The cattle grazing season was a "very difficult year for everybody," a Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife official says.

"Having three consecutive years with wolf-livestock conflict in the same area of the Kettles, that's not good for wolves, cows or people," said Donny Martorello, who heads the agency's wolf management efforts.

Ranchers, rural communities, environmental groups and the department were among those impacted, Martorello said.

The department is looking for

ways it can reduce the likelihood of conflict, particularly in "high-risk" landscapes, he said.

This year, the department conducted more than 70 livestock depredation investigations, said Candace Bennett, the department's wildlife conflict specialist in northeast Washington.

The investigations were for wolf, cougar, coyote, one bear and two unknown causes, Bennett said. The number of depredations caused by wolves and cougars were about equal, she estimated.

She estimated there were more livestock injuries this year than deaths. The Old Profanity Territory wolfpack caused more injuries, the Togo wolfpack had about the same number of each and the

Smackout pack had the most livestock deaths.

There were three depredations by the Grouse Flats pack.

That number of predator investigations was higher than usual for the department, Bennett said. Cougar depredations began early and wolf depredations, which usually start around August, extended into November.

Bennett expects some depredations to continue throughout the winter.

Martorello said it was a "very busy summer," with ongoing depredations in several packs, department decisions to kill problem wolves in three different packs and the added requirement of an eight-hour public notice to give envi-

ronmental groups time to seek a restraining order, the result of a court decision.

Martorello pointed to the workload to prepare documentation.

"Unfortunately, reality is that preparation takes away from our time for wolf conservation and management ... at all levels in the agency," he said. "We understand where we're at, we also understand we want to keep our priority stand on the things on the ground to move forward."

Advisory group member Samee Charriere, a rancher in Clarkston, asked the group to consider ways to increase the efficiency of livestock depredation investigations, for both ranchers and the department.