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## OMG, GMO! Legislative Hearing Roleplay

*Oh my gosh, genetically modified organisms! It is a controversy that Oregonians will weigh in on this fall. Oregon voters will decide whether to label genetically engineered foods.*

The **ballot measure** reads as follows:

### **Measure 92 Requires food manufacturers, retailers to label "genetically engineered" foods as such; state, citizens may enforce**

**Result of "Yes" Vote:** "Yes" vote requires the labeling of raw and packaged foods produced entirely or partially by "genetic engineering," effective January 2016; applies to retailers, suppliers, manufacturers.

**Result of "No" Vote:** "No" vote retains existing law, which does not require "genetically engineered" food to be labeled as such.

**Summary:** Current law does not require labeling of "genetically engineered" food. Measure requires retailers of genetically-engineered raw food to include "Genetically Engineered" on packages, display bins, or shelves; suppliers must label shipping containers. Requires manufacturers of packaged food produced entirely or partially by genetic engineering to include "Produced with Genetic Engineering" or "Partially Produced with Genetic Engineering" on packages. Defines genetically engineered" food as food produced from organisms with genetic material changed through in vitro nucleic acid techniques and certain cell-fusing techniques; exempts traditional plant-breeding techniques like hybridization. Does not apply to animal feed or food served in restaurants. Directs agencies to implement law. Permits state, injured citizen to sue manufacturer, retailer for knowing/intentional violation; attorney fees for prevailing citizen. Other provisions.

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**In this activity**, students will take on the role of stakeholders in the GMO question. After studying their position, they will testify in a mock legislative hearing. Students may rely on the materials that follow. Resources are included if students wish to do further research.

In small groups, students shall

- read and discuss your position (plus, as time allows, read other stakeholders in order to more effectively defend your positions);
- list your group's pros and cons;
- prepare a 2-minute statement to present in the hearing;
- decide who will be your spokesperson(s) when testifying;
- prepare to testify at a legislative committee meeting including answering questions from the "legislators."

**Stakeholder groups** include:

1. Center for Food Choice
2. Consumers Union
3. Organic Farmers
4. Non-Organic Farmers
5. Oregon Retail Association
6. American Association for Advancement of Science

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## 1. Center for Food Choice

As a member of a national organization dedicated to the protection of human health and environmental advocacy through curbing the use of harmful food production technologies, you are a big supporter of Measure 92. You believe that consumers need to have the right to choose the kind of food they eat, buy and support. You think the market is not providing an effective and equitable mechanism for consumers who prefer non-genetically modified food to shop accordingly.

Your priorities are:

- You believe that people have a right to know important information about the food they are consuming, this labeling of GMOs allows people to make more informed decisions about the food they buy.
- As a believer that not all the long-term effects of consuming GMOs are known, and suspecting that consuming GMOs is a serious health risk, you believe people should have the right to avoid eating GMOs if they don't want to.
- You don't trust companies like Monsanto that are making these genetically engineered foods. They are the same companies that are manufacturing the pesticides that the genetically engineered foods are supposed to be resistant to. This strikes you as inherently suspect and you rather avoid eating these foods in general.
- You have environmental concerns about the proliferation of GMOs, such as the growing epidemic of "superweeds," (herbicide-resistance weeds).
- You think that farmers are overlooking potential benefits of GMO labeling, such as being able to enter foreign markets (China, Russia, Japan, the EU member states) that require labeling of GMO foods, which they were not able to enter before.

Sources: <http://www.centerforfoodsafety.org/about-us>,  
<http://www.centerforfoodsafety.org/issues/976/ge-food-labeling>; retrieved July 2014.

## 2. Consumers Union

As a member of the Consumers Union organization you believe in the general principles of consumer choice and knowledge. You believe that each consumer has a right to know how, and with what, the products they are buying are made.

Your priorities are:

- Getting GMO food labeled across America. This Oregon bill presents an important step for increasing the momentum behind the label GMOs movement.
- As someone who is primarily concerned with the consumers' well being, you support this bill as it gives consumers the opportunity to make informed decisions with a conscience for both health and the environment.
- Labeling is also important because it allows the consumer to report allergic or other adverse reactions to regulators.
- You're less worried about the potential environmental effects of GMOs and more concerned with maximizing the information available to consumers. Giving the consumer all the information and knowledge possible to help them make choices about the food they buy is your number one priority.
- You don't buy the argument that this labeling requirement will increase retail costs for consumers. Relabeling of food products is done all the time and with very limited hassle and effort.
- You have serious questions about the validity of studies showing GMOs to be the same, health-wise, as non-GMOs.

Sources: <https://consumersunion.org/news/consumers-union-statement-on-vermont-gmo-labeling-bill/> ;  
<http://consumersunion.org/news/consumers-union-statement-on-new-long-term-study-of-feeding-ge-grains-to-pigs/> ;  
<http://consumersunion.org/news/letter-to-oregon-governor-supporting-mandatory-labeling-of-foods-using-genetic-engineering/>; retrieved July 2014.

### 3. Organic Farmers

As an organic farmer and a member of the organic and natural food industry you wholeheartedly support this bill. As an organic farmer not only does this bill does not affect you in any way, but in addition it has the potential to put some of your biggest competitors at a competitive disadvantage in the marketplace.

Your priorities are:

- You believe that GMO labeling represents an important right of the consumer to choose what kind of food they want to eat, with all the possible information available to them to help them make that choice.
- Ideally, you want a bill that would outright ban the use of GMO crops in Oregon. You will settle for the passage of this bill because you hope that this labeling requirement drastically reduces the amount of GMO farming that goes on around you. You are worried that GMO pollen will travel via wind and infect your crops, as has happened before. You and other organic farmers face the loss of thousand of dollars when GMO seeds and pollen infect your crops, as you can no longer sell them as organic or natural.
- You believe that passing this bill would represent an all-important, but beginning step in the fight against corporate control of plant genetics. You believe these companies are reinforcing unsustainable practices.
- You do not believe that GMOs lead to higher yields among crops.
- You are concerned that these chemical companies are taking control over the American farmer; you are concerned that chemical companies that are producing the pesticides inside the plants people eat are buying the seed / agriculture industry.
- You are worried that genetically engineered plants that are resistant to high-levels pesticides encourages the production and use of even more pesticides. Pesticides that have harmful effects on the environment and human health.
- The passing of this bill would harm your competitors and help your business. Non-organic farmers and non-organic food producers would most likely face increased production costs. This would result in increased retail prices, while your goods face no similar increase in price. In addition the publicity and news coverage that would surround the passing of this bill would in effect amount to free advertising and publicity for your products.

Sources:

<http://tilth.org/news/five-gmo-myths-busted/?searchterm=GMOs>;

<http://tilth.org/advocacy/advocacy-spotlights/just-label-it> ; retrieved August 12, 2014.

#### 4. Non-Organic Farmers

As a non-organic farmer you are greatly opposed to the passing of this bill. You see this bill as an attack on your business by your competitors in the natural food industry. You think they are hiding this under the guise of promoting consumer choice and environmental consciousness.

Your priorities are:

- Preventing this bill from passing. If this bill passes you fear drastically increased costs of production and face new, competitive disadvantage in the marketplace against your competitors in the natural and organic food industries.
- You see this as an attempt to increase the market for your competitors and stigmatize your product as “unhealthy,” or “unnatural.”
- You think that genetically engineered food has many benefits that are being overlooked by the proponents of this bill. They allow for increased yields from crops and decrease the amount of water needed for the crops. This decreases the cost for consumers buying your goods, as it decreases the cost for you in producing the goods.
- You believe all farmers should be able to decide what kind of farming works best for them and their customer base, without facing any outside, governmentally-enforced incentives promoting one type of farming over another.

Source: <http://www.oregonfb.org/gmos/>; retrieved July 2014.

## 5. Oregon Retail Association

As a member of the Oregon Retail Association you oppose this bill. This bill will require retail stores to make sure that all GMOs will have special labels and signs stating which products contain genetically engineered ingredients. This bill will in all likelihood increase your costs and provide a competitive advantage to stores like New Season's or Whole Foods that predominantly sell natural and organic products.

Your priorities are:

- Making sure this bill does not pass. You view it as a costly, unnecessary measure. If consumers do not want to eat genetically modified food then they should only purchase items that are "certified organic."
- You especially do not like that this bill does not require restaurants to undergo the same type of labeling. If the groups supporting this were truly about consumer choice as they say, then why wouldn't they also require restaurants to indicate on their menu which dishes contain GMOs?
- You see this bill as essentially a scare tactic to scare people away from technology.
- You believe that this will drastically increase grocery prices for families, as well as increase business prices for yourself and increase your exposure to frivolous lawsuits.

Sources:

<http://www.gmaonline.org/news-events/newsroom/vermont-gmo-labeling-law-critically-flawed-and-costly-for-consumers/>;

<http://www.gmaonline.org/news-events/newsroom/anti-gmo-groups-rep-defazio-ignore-scientific-consensus-on-gmos-lead-effor/>; retrieved July 2014.

## 6. American Association for Advancement of Science

You generally support the consumer's right to know whether their food is genetically engineered, but you have serious concerns about some of the claims supporters of the bill are making. In general, you believe that the science available shows genetically engineered food to be fine for human consumption and fear the stigmatizing of something that could potentially have great benefits for mankind.

Your priorities are:

- You are worried that this bill represents increasing momentum to strangle the desperately needed innovation in the agricultural industry through suffocating regulations that are not based in any rational scientific assessment of the risk.
- The association that you are a member of, as well as the World Health Organization, and the European Union agree that GMOs are just safe as other foods. While acknowledging that we don't know enough about the long-term effects of consuming GMOs you feel that the conversation surrounding this issue hasn't acknowledged the lack of evidence showing that GMOs are harmful.
- You want the benefits of genetically engineered food to be more properly explored and considered before enacting this measure. You feel the supporters of this bill are overlooking the things that GMOs can do to help the environment and improve sustainability.
- You are worried that this bill is representative of the fearmongering that is increasingly surrounding the subject of GMOs. GMOs have many positive traits, they require less water and pesticides to grow and maintain, traits that are highly beneficial to the government.
- In addition GMOs can be extremely helpful to developing countries. For example, genetically engineered Golden Rice is helping to cure vitamin A deficiency, which blinds about 500,000 children worldwide every year and kills half of them.
- You support the consumer's right to know, but believe the more cost-efficient way is just to tell consumers that unless they are buying something that is "certified organic" they should just assume they are consuming GMOs, as about 70-80% of grocery products contain ingredients from these foods.

Sources:

<http://www.tri-cityherald.com/2013/10/13/2623564/our-voice-reject-initiative-522.html>;

<http://blogs.seattletimes.com/opinionnw/2013/02/18/video-initiative-522-perpetuates-myths-about-gmo-food/> ; retrieved July 2014.