

Response to the Whole Foods Announcement that they will require Transgenic Food to be Labeled by 2018

Whole Foods should not need five years to get this job done. By then federal law will likely require labeling. The tide is rising against transgenic food, so their announcement is no more than a public relations hedge. The real problem is this: Whole Foods is in the tank with the large corporate food processors whose revenues come largely from food with transgenic content, even though they have small organic subsidiaries. Whole Foods needs to divorce these companies and let them sell products elsewhere.

Whole Foods needs to do more than they have done if they want to be a real leader in the organic marketplace. They need to be more than a monopolistic exploiter of organic consumers in much the same way Monsanto has exploited and monopolized the seed market. This is a question of morality, but Whole Foods would not have made the announcement they did if they did not see it as good business to respond in some way to the demands of their customers. They can see that the Non-GMO Project label is helping to increase sales of non-transgenic food. The Non-GMO Project allows no more than .9% of GMO content in products carrying their label even though no independent, long-term studies have proved even that amount of transgenic content is safe, healthful, or nutritious. The safety issue is a longer discussion.

Instead of taking a timid future step allowing the documented allergies, toxicities, illnesses, and afflictions caused by transgenic food to continue for five more years, Whole Foods could start by eliminating from their stores all the brands owned by companies that supported the defeat of Proposition 37 in California, and they could offer a bigger selection of certified organic products instead of offering readily available chemically-raised food as if that would be the best a certified organic chain with 339 stores could do. If they wanted to provide real leadership on safety and health issues, they could do it.

If Whole Foods wanted to serve the public interest at a time when more than half of the U.S. people have shown through polling a desire to eat organic food if it could be found and afforded, they could use their buying power to build the organic market and help inform people why it is better for their health. Instead they offer much the same food offered by many other grocery chains. Often, they do not even have fresh organic foods available in regular chain stores (at least in this area); they have had decades to line up high quality suppliers under contract, but they have not done it.

Here is what my friend Fred Lundgren wrote in his open letter to John Mackey of Whole Foods:

I am a 4th generation Travis County Texas land owner and my son is a local organic farmer in eastern Travis County near Austin.

I was a staff assistant to Jim Hightower during the 1980s at the Texas Department of Agriculture. I remember when Whole Foods was called "Saferway" and I remember when it was destroyed by the Memorial Day flood in Austin and how the community helped it to recover.

During our years at the State Capitol, we helped to popularize and promote the idea of organic farming and we drafted many organic food production regulations that eventually found their way into federal law. We never dreamed of a time when crops would be sprayed with Roundup and then sold at Whole Food Markets without labeling.

Back then, the concept of GMOs did not exist. However, if it had been introduced, the idea of selling genetically modified crops that had been adulterated with Roundup would have been seen as an abomination and even criminal.

Now, Whole Foods "boasts" of requiring the addition of GMO labels over a multi-year period? Oh, how things have changed.

I am amazed at how consistently the chase for the almighty dollar has formulated your company's situation ethics over the years, thus replacing the spirit of a really great organization.

I just read (for a second time), your press release on eventually requiring GMO labels for products sold in Whole Foods Markets.

Your attempt to rationalize the sale of GMOs by labeling them is simply absurd.

I own a radio station in Southern California and I saw the chemical lobby systematically destroy the 2012 GMO labeling campaign with 50 million dollars worth of lies. They warned of \$400.00 bread and \$50.00 milk. They bought almost every newspaper in the state. Almost no media outlet except KCAA explained that GMO modification allows farmers to spray Roundup herbicide directly on their growing crops to eliminate the need for hand weeding and mechanical cultivation. No other media outlet told the public that 80% of all corn and 95% of all soybeans in America are sprayed with Roundup.

Why didn't Whole Foods tell this story in California? Instead, Whole Foods did virtually nothing to offset Monsanto's campaign of disinformation. And now, only months later, your company boasts of requiring labeling...eventually? I have a basic question that deserves a straight answer. Why does Whole Foods sell any GMO products at all? From my point of view, Whole Foods has lost its way and it needs to redefine its core values.

Sincerely, Fred Lundgren, Founder and ceo of KCAA Radio, Loma Linda, CA; www.kcaaradio.com

I agree with Fred. For years Whole Foods made a public commitment not to sell transgenic food and many of their employees still think that is the company position. Customers are still told that is the company position, even though they have had sufficient time to inform their own people about the correct facts. When they caved in on the policy in 2010 saying it was no longer possible for transgenic content to be avoided, they also endorsed "co-existence" between organic and transgenic agriculture even though this was a sellout of an organic future. They were criticized for both decisions because they were not in the interest of organic consumers. Extensive discussion was conducted on the Whole Foods blog, until I, for one, was told to take the discussion somewhere else. The decisions had stirred up a hornet's nest, and Whole Foods showed they wanted to sweep the issue aside without enabling discussion among their customers about it. Their pro-corporate, anti-consumer values were made clear.

"Co-existence" asks the lamb to lie down with the lion until the lamb is turned into dinner. As the British scientist Arpad Pusztai has said, "Co-existence is a one-way street." It ends with the destruction of organic farming and organic food. Just as bad, Whole Foods gave only lukewarm and late support to Proposition 37 when strong support and appropriate funding from them could have made the difference in the outcome. They do not win my praise taking baby steps when real leadership was and still is needed.

This is a human health and safety issue. As Jeffrey Smith of the Institute for Responsible Technology has helped us to know through his film "Genetic Roulette," digestive tract disorders have greatly increased along with the level of allergy and infertility since transgenic food has been put on the market, but this is just the beginning of the discussion of the health issues needing further scrutiny and research. This is not a matter where a belated, foot dragging PR sham by Whole Foods is good enough.

Whole Foods is the nation's first and only organically certified grocery chain. They need to live up to the privilege they have been given; instead they have allowed chemically-raised food to be good enough for their customers, and they call chemically-raised food "conventional" when they should call it what it is: chemically contaminated food. Since when should a corporately-sponsored chemical displacement of organic agricultural wisdom be called "conventional?" Organic farming has been the established convention for millennia. It requires food grown in harmony with nature.

Whole Foods should immediately begin to make sure no meat animals, fish, dairy or poultry products sold in their stores have been produced using anything transgenic. Short of that minimal step in response to research findings on the dangers of transgenic toxins in food, Whole Foods remains more a part of the problem than they are part of the solution. That step is needed in living up to the organic ideal.

Don Patterson,

83rd Plaintiff and 75th Appellant in OSGATA et al. v. Monsanto