

Campaign for right to know on GM foods

According to The African Centre for Biosafety (ACB) and the South African Freeze Alliance on Genetic Engineering (SAFEAGE), the latest draft regulations on GM food published by the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) are wholly inadequate and unsatisfactory, since it fails to protect the citizens' 'freedom of choice' on what they eat.

The groups argue that the scope of the regulations short-sightedly only apply to three GM food types, namely, maize, soybean and imported canola oil and exclude new approvals of GMOs such as GM potatoes and GM salmon that may come to the South African market in the future.

They have launched a nation-wide 'Label GM Food: Our Right to Know' campaign, to encourage the government to provide meaningful labelling for all genetically-modified (GM) foods in regulations under the Consumer Protection Act.

The regulations also allow companies to avoid labelling products where the GM ingredient in a food product contains less than 5% of GM content. "A 5% threshold not only denies us 'Our Right To Know', but is misleading. Consumers will be under the false impression that food containing less than 5% GM content is actually GM Free," said Zakiyya Ismail, campaign manager for the ACB.

They argue that the regulations have created a loophole that allows companies to avoid labelling and rely on the more ambiguous label, 'May contain GM..' on the grounds that it is not feasible or possible for them to test for the presence of GM. According to Fahrie Hassan, of SAFEAGE and media liaison for the campaign, "this 'opt out' provision will render labelling GM food ineffective and meaningless and deny us Our Right to Know."

ACB and SAFEAGE are vehemently opposed to GMOs in the food and agricultural sector because GMOs pose unacceptable risks to human and animal health, the environment and society.

The campaign is calling on the public to support effective and meaningful labelling by signing a web-based petition at www.labelgmfoods.co.za for submission to the DTI by 31 January 2011.