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Cost to label genetic food is overblown

Just \$28 million a year: Quebec study

87% want to know if food contains GMOs

BY MICHELLE LALONDE

Mandatory labelling of genetically modified foods would cost much less than the food industry has claimed, a new study commissioned by Quebec's Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food reveals.

The as-yet-unpublished study, obtained by The Gazette, estimates the yearly cost of such a program at \$28 million to Quebec's food industry and \$1.7 million to the provincial government.

Previous studies commissioned by the food industry - and cited by the federal and Quebec governments as reason not to act on the issue - pegged the annual cost of implementing such a system at up to \$950 million (both government and industry) for the whole country, and up to \$200 million in Quebec alone.

At a news conference planned for this afternoon, environmental groups, organic food advocates and consumer groups are expected to renew calls for mandatory labelling in Quebec and to denounce Jean Charest's Liberals for abandoning a 2003 election pledge to bring in a labelling system.

Eric Darier of Greenpeace says the new study, written by Martin Cloutier of the Universite du Quebec a Montreal, shows that the cost of mandatory labelling is reasonable.

"Thirty million is a much lower figure than what (the food industry) has been saying," he said.

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Considering Quebecers spend about \$30 billion on food every year, it is a cost that could and should be absorbed by the industry, Darier added.

Many commonly consumed processed foods - an estimated 70 per cent of the processed foods found on grocery store shelves - contain or may contain genetically modified organisms, or GMOs.

GMOs are organisms with genetic material that has been altered using gene technology.

While there is uncertainty over whether genetically modified foods pose a long-term danger to human health and environmental threats are debated, polls have consistently shown that a strong majority of Canadians want to know whether there are GMOs in the foods they buy.

A 2004 survey by Leger Marketing indicated 83 per cent of Canadians - and 87 per cent of Quebecers - want mandatory labelling of GMO foods.

Canada is a major producer of genetically altered crops, such as corn and soy, along with the U.S., Argentina, China and Brazil.

Many countries require mandatory labelling of foods that contain GMOs, including the European Union countries, Japan, China, Australia and New Zealand.

Labelling requires the implementation of separate production, harvesting, storage, handling and processing systems for genetically modified and completely natural foods, plus a validation system, and separate shelf allocations by retailers.

While some assume the costs of such a system would simply be passed to consumers through higher food prices, Darier said this has not proven to be the case in other countries where labelling is mandatory.

"The international experience shows there is no impact on consumers, because the entrepreneurs decided to change the way they do things to absorb the supplemental costs," Darier said.

Greenpeace and other anti-GMO groups argue that long-term human health effects of consuming genetically engineered food have not been studied, and cite such potential health risks as resistance to antibiotics and allergic reactions.