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The Truth

By: [Dean Kleckner](#), [AgWeb.com](#)

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Dean is Chairman of "The Truth About Trade & Technology" - a nonprofit advocacy group led by American farmers.

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Labeling A Rally For What It Is

MAR 31, 2011

By [Ted Sheely](#) - Lemoore, California

Truth About Trade & Technology

Outside the White House last weekend, anti-biotech activists sponsored an event called "Rally for the Right to Know." Their goal was to promote a personal ideology: They want the federal government to slap warning labels on non-organic food products.

Judging from the lack of media coverage, maybe they should organize a rally for the right to know whether anybody showed up. Their protest appears to have been a near-total bust.

Here's the really amusing part. For all of their fussing over labels, these professional protestors struggle with how to describe themselves. The "Rally for the Right to Know" was part an effort sponsored by the Organic Consumers Association to demonize a company that produces biotech seeds for American farmers who want to plant them--in other words, guys like me.

Yet if the campaign can't turn out more than a handful of disgruntled picketers, then perhaps it should worry about the labels it applies to itself before it tries to force labels on everyone else.

It's bad enough that the handpicked names of their own causes are examples of untruths in advertising. Even worse than this semantic con job, however, is the substance of their scheme. Their agenda is to have packages of food products containing non-organic soy, corn, cottonseed oil, canola, and sugar beets carry a label that says "May Contain GMOs." (They also want all beef, pork, dairy, and eggs that come from Confined Animal Feeding Operations to be marked "CAFO.")

The problem is that such a label conveys almost no worthwhile information for consumers as they make decisions in grocery stores. According to the Department of Agriculture, 86 percent of the corn and 93 percent of the soybeans grown in the United States are genetically modified. Americans eat this every day. And we have been for years. There is nothing wrong with it--and absolutely no reason why products that contain these ingredients should carry a warning label that suggests otherwise.

The whole point of this exercise is to make Americans fearful about modern agricultural methods--and to assume that "May Contain GMOs" is a rough equivalent of those surgeon general's warnings on packages of cigarettes.

There's something Machiavellian about what these activists are trying to achieve. If anti-biotech labels mislead consumers, the organic food industry stands to reap enormous profits. It's already a big business. The Organic Trade Association says that it sold food and personal-care products worth almost \$27 billion in 2009. That's roughly the net worth of Larry Ellison, the software magnate who is the third-richest person on the Forbes 400 list. The goal of the organic industry is to rake in even more dollars from people who wouldn't normally buy its food, which is significantly more expensive than food produced through conventional farming practices, including biotechnology.

These plotters would have you believe that they're just a lovable band of foodies who are taking on big, bad corporations. In reality, this is a classic case of a special-

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interest group trying to manipulate the federal government in order to gain a competitive advantage over its rivals.

There is in fact nothing suspicious and certainly not harmful about GM food. Over the last decade and a half, farmers have planted and harvested more than 2 billion acres of biotech crops. Untold numbers of people have eaten an unimaginably large number of servings of food with these ingredients. Despite this impressive ubiquity, nobody has ever documented a single health problem that can be traced back to biotechnology.

The evidence in support of biotech food is overwhelming. If the organic crowd was truly interested in accuracy, it might suggest this for a label: "May Contain GMOs, which have been endorsed by a wide range of governmental and scientific bodies such as the National Research Council of the National Academies of Science, the American Dietetic Association, the American Medical Association, the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization, and the World Health Organization."

But that wouldn't frighten consumers. And it probably wouldn't leave room to say much of anything else on a food package.

Ted Sheely raises lettuce, cotton, tomatoes, wheat, pistachios, wine grapes and garlic on a family farm in the California San Joaquin Valley. He is a board member of Truth About Trade and Technology www.truthabouttrade.org

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