

THE LAW

Shopping in the dark

Meaningless labels feed confusion.

Consumers could see changes to the way food is labelled with parliamentarians heeding community concerns and calling for action to improve the information on packets, cans and lids of processed food products.

Two private senators' bills currently before federal parliament take steps towards more informative food labelling. One calls for the clear identification of any amount of genetically modified material in foods, while the other seeks to provide more accurate labelling of palm oil.

Community concern about the inadequacy of food labelling has also been debated in the House of Representatives following a private member's motion by Amanda Rishworth (Kingston, SA).

Ms Rishworth said the community is concerned about labelling of the origin of food, the nutritional value of food and food production methods including the use of food technologies.

"Consumers want to buy Australian food not only to support Australian farmers, although this is often a big motivation, but for health and safety reasons," she said.

"Consumers have confidence in Australian farming practices, including things such as the chemicals used and the type of environment the food is grown in. But they are not equally confident about the standards and

environment for growing food in other countries."

Ms Rishworth said she has heard that some foods labelled as "made from Australian and imported ingredients" may actually contain up to 95 per cent imported ingredients.

She said consumers are also confused about claims on food products such as 'natural', 'pure', 'fresh', and 'free range'.

"For many of these descriptors there is no definition or guidelines for use within the Food Standards Code, effectively making these terms meaningless."

Co-sponsor of both Senate bills, Senator Nick Xenophon has slammed Australia's current labelling requirements as "one of the weakest food labelling regimes in the world".

He said consumers have a right to know what they are eating but are "shopping in the dark".

Speaking on the Food Standards Amendment (Truth in Labelling – Genetically Modified Material) Bill 2010, Senator Xenophon said consumers are increasingly concerned about what is in their food and what they are feeding their families.

According to the bill's other sponsor, Senator Rachel Siewert, up to 70 per cent of processed food contains GM ingredients but almost none is legally required to be labelled.

This bill, the senators said, will require any amount of GM material to be clearly labelled.

"Under the bill, Food Standards Australia New Zealand will be required to introduce a standard for the labelling of genetically modified material, irrespective of the amount or how it came to be present," Senator Xenophon said.

"It also requires Food Standards Australia New Zealand to establish due diligence guidelines for products which claim to be GM-free. This will ensure that products which claim to be GM-free, whether it's by way of using it in their labelling or by not having any labelling, will be required to provide evidence of their claim," he said.

Senator Siewert said the full extent of the impact of GM on human and environmental health is not fully known and therefore precaution should be exercised.

"What's being hidden from us is potentially impacting our health."

"For the environment, genetically modified organisms (GMOs) can have a devastating and irreversible effect. GMOs are capable of escaping and potentially introduce the engineered genes into wild populations. The impact from season to season of GM is also unquantifiable with the GMO gene persisting after the GMO has been harvested. That means it is not as simple as having a GM crop one year and then being able to revert to non-GM crops the following year," Senator Siewert said.

"For human health, there are three main issues which arise with the use of GMOs. Allergenicity or allergic reactions; gene transfer, for example if antibiotic resistant genes used in creating GMOs were to be transferred to the body; and outcrossing, which is the movement of genes from GM plants into conventional crops or related species in the wild," she said.

"There are no long term studies on the impact of GM on human health."

Speaking on the Food Standards Amendment (Truth in Labelling – Palm Oil) Bill 2010, Senator Xenophon said the current laws allow manufacturers to "disguise" palm oil as vegetable oil.

Some foods labelled as "made from Australian and imported ingredients" may actually contain up to 95 per cent imported ingredients.

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SHOPPING DAZE: Labels are inadequate and misleading for consumers. Photo: Thinkstock



Senator Xenophon said not only is palm oil high in saturated fats, which increases the risk of heart disease, but unsustainable harvesting practices may lead to the extinction of orang-utans in the wild in less than 10 years.

“In South East Asia alone, the equivalent of 300 soccer fields is deforested every hour for palm oil plantations and each year more than 1,000 orang-utans die as a result of land clearing in this region. There’s no question the current labelling laws are inadequate and misleading consumers,” Senator Xenophon said.

“When you’re shopping for your weekly groceries at the supermarket and you turn over the packet to read the ingredients of a bag of chips, a block of chocolate or a box of biscuits, you’d expect that ‘what you see is what you get’.

“But believe it or not, that’s not always the case.

“And what’s being hidden from us is potentially impacting our health and is destroying the environment.”

“It goes to the health of our nation’s children.”

He said palm oil can be found in approximately 40 per cent of food products in the supermarket and every year the average Australian consumes around 10 kilograms of palm oil “without even knowing it”.

In the House of Representatives, Judi Moylan (Pearce, WA) said she has been contacted by many constituents concerned about the misleading labelling of palm oil.

“The palm oil controversy reinforces my long held belief that consumers should be empowered with clear information so they can make an informed choice about both

the content of their food and its production origins,” Mrs Moylan said.

“Increasing concern not only about sustainable practices but also, even more importantly, about the health and viability of the food industry and Australia’s food security makes addressing food labelling an extremely important issue. It goes to the health of our nation’s children as well as to all who consume food. So it is a critical issue.”

The two private senators’ bills have been referred to the Senate Community Affairs Legislation Committee which is due to report in June this year.

In addition, the federal government is considering its response to a report by an independent panel into food labelling law and policy. Parliamentary Secretary for Health and Ageing, Catherine King said the report’s 61 recommendations need to be carefully assessed, with a government response due in December. ●