

California voters to decide if genetically engineered foods should be labeled

By Marc Lifsher, Los Angeles Times

SACRAMENTO – A fight over genetically engineered foods has been heating up in the nation's grocery aisles. Now it's headed for the ballot box.

Voters will soon decide whether to make California the first state in the country to require labels on products such as sweet corn whose genes have been altered to make them resistant to pests.

Proposition 37 promises to set up a big-money battle pitting natural food businesses and activists against multinational companies including PepsiCo, Coca-Cola and Kellogg. Backers and opponents have already raised nearly \$4 million combined for campaigns to sway voters, an amount that's likely to swell into the tens of millions of dollars as the November election approaches.

So-called GMO foods – those made from genetically modified organisms – have been declared safe by U.S. regulators. But concern persists about the unforeseen consequences of this laboratory tinkering on human health and the environment.

The outcome in California could rattle the entire U.S. food chain. An estimated 70 percent to 80 percent of processed foods sold in supermarkets could be affected, industry experts said, along with a variety of fresh fruits and vegetables. The measure qualified for the California ballot with nearly 1 million signatures; labeling in the state could set a precedent that's followed nationwide.

“This will be a big fight,” said Shaun Bowler, a UC Riverside political scientist specializing in initiatives. “This is a popular issue because people are very afraid of the words ‘genetically engineered.’ And the people who sell this stuff are worried about losing sales.”

Backers of the initiative are encouraged by a pair of recent national opinion surveys showing that about 9 out of 10 consumers support labeling. A California-specific poll, released Thursday by the Business Roundtable and the Pepperdine University School of Public Policy, showed Proposition 37 has an almost 3-to-1 ratio of support, with 64.9 percent of prospective voters favoring it, compared with 23.9 percent opposed.

Read the whole story