

GMO food label battle heating up

By Eric M. Johnson and Carey Gillam, Reuters

Major U.S. food and chemical companies are pouring millions of dollars into efforts to block approval of a ballot initiative in Washington state that would make it the first in the United States to require labeling of foods containing genetically modified crops.

Despite early strong support for the measure, a recent poll suggests sentiment against the measure, known as I-522, is growing amid an onslaught of corporate-financed advertising ahead of the Nov. 5 referendum. Voters will decide whether many common grocery items containing ingredients from genetically altered crops should be labeled as such.

Supporters say labeling foods made from genetically modified organisms (GMO) would provide information for consumers to make informed shopping choices. Food and chemical companies say the wording would suggest something is wrong with gene modified ingredients that the companies believe are safe.

Many foods are made with crops that have been genetically altered. Corn and soy, two top biotech crops, are key ingredients in processed foods from cereal to chips to cookies.

The Grocery Manufacturers Association, which represents more than 300 food and beverage companies, has put roughly \$11 million into fighting the measure, or roughly half of the nearly \$22 million raised by opponents of labeling, according to Washington Public Disclosure Commission figures as of Tuesday.

That far outstrips the roughly \$6.8 million raised by

supporters of the labeling initiative, according to the Commission.

“They are making this the most expensive race and are desperately adding last-minute money to try and buy this election,” said Liz Larter, spokeswoman for “Yes on 522” campaign, a reference to the ballot measure’s number.

State Attorney General Bob Ferguson, a Democrat, said in a lawsuit filed Oct. 16 that the grocery group illegally collected and spent more than \$7 million while shielding the identity of its contributors.

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