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Washington state voters weigh the ethics of genetically modified foods

by Tracy Simmons by Religion News Service

Eco Catholic

Spokane, Wash. — Grocery aisles in Washington state could look a little different in 2015 if voters approve a ballot measure Tuesday to require product labels to disclose when genetically modified crops are included.

Most of the processed foods and beverages that dominate the shelves are made with some sort of genetically modified crop, like soy or corn.

Campbell Soup Co., PepsiCo Inc. and Kellogg Co. are among the companies pumping money into the fight against the referendum, known as Initiative 522, claiming the measure is misleading, would hurt farmers and raise grocery costs.

Proponents of the initiative, however, say it's an ethical issue about giving consumers the right to know what they're eating.

"What people want is labeling so they can have a choice about what they're putting into their bodies. It's their choice what's healthy for them, and not somebody else's," said Ron Cully, a grass-roots activist for I-522.

Some researchers, however, say there's no evidence genetically modified organisms, or GMOs, pose health and safety risks.

Monsanto Co., a chemical and agricultural biotechnology company that opposes I-522, claims on its website that plants and crops with genetically modified traits have been tested thoroughly and there's no

credible evidence of harm to humans or animals.

Ellen Maccarone, associate professor of philosophy at Jesuit-run Gonzaga University, said there are both pros and cons to genetically modified foods.

"If we were talking about golden rice in India preventing childhood vitamin A deficient blindness, that would be a pro. But generally here we are not talking about those things. The cons have to do with a wider set of issues about how food is grown, who has control over it, and how it is processed and how that affects health and the environment," she said.

A similar initiative, Proposition 37, failed in California last year, but this summer, Connecticut and Maine passed food labeling legislation, although those laws won't take effect until other states pass similar measures. If the measure passes, Washington would be the first state to pass a mandatory food-labeling law for GMOs with no stipulations.

Maccarone said this shows there's a growing interest in consumers wanting to know where their food is coming from.

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"The increase in farmers markets and the like indicate that people are thinking about food and the food economy differently than just a few years ago," she said. "Food has always had a central role in people's spiritual, ethical and cultural lives. Giving them information so they can do this with more integrity is something we shouldn't be afraid of."

[Tracy Simmons is the editor of Spokane Faith & Values.]

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