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## Scientific American Editors' GMO Labeling Stance Insults Americans

By [Ralph Loglisci](#) on [November 5, 2013](#)



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Known as the “world’s premier source for advances in science and technology,” the Scientific American (SA) magazine and its editors have done themselves and the American people a disservice by claiming in a recent [editorial](#) that, “Labels for GMO Foods Are a Bad Idea.”

Today, or more likely in the next few days when the final votes are tallied, we will learn whether Washington State will be the first state in the nation to require labels for foods made with genetically modified organisms (GMOs). Connecticut and Maine both passed labels laws this year, but will not enforce them until more states join them.

Tens of millions of campaign dollars have been spent to sway voters’ on [Initiative 522](#). According to the [Washington Post](#), it’s the most expensive ballot initiative campaign in the state’s history. Like last year’s avalanche of corporate money to defeat a GMO labeling effort in California, it’s not a surprise that corporate food giants have spent nearly \$22 million to block I-522.

Voters will have to weigh through all the confusing hype and misinformation from both sides of this issue. The SA editors have joined industry in trying to persuade public opinion against the benefits of labeling GMOs. Their argument is that labels might scare uninformed American consumers from purchasing GMO foods and thwart future development of GMO technology.

Insinuating that Americans cannot be trusted to make informed purchasing decisions on their own is down right insulting and totally out of sync with the majority of Americans who want to know what’s in their food.

I want to make it very clear that I am not against biotechnology research advances; I think they play an important role in the future of medical and agricultural sciences. I am, however, opposed to the position that SA believes that labels for GMO foods are a bad idea. Preventing people from knowing what’s in their food, in my opinion, is a bad idea.

The editors believe American consumers will become confused over mandatory labels and stop buying foods made with GMOs based on misconceptions that, “so-called Frankenfoods endanger people’s health.” This is not a forward thinking position to take.

If SA editors believe, as poll after poll show, that the 93 percent of Americans who support GMO labeling are making their decision based on irrational fears, then they should work harder to convince them that their fears are truly baseless, rather than supporting efforts to deny people the right to truth, transparency, and

trust. We can never expect to have a strong democracy, or an enlightened consumer-base for that matter, if we do not ensure citizens are making well-informed decisions.

The word *science* is derived from the Latin word *scire*, which means *to know*. However, it seems that the SA editors believe Americans do not need *to know* whether their food is genetically engineered, or worse, they believe Americans are too obtuse to understand an issue that we all agree "... is in no way simple."

When debating the ultimate powers of the U.S. Supreme Court, [Thomas Jefferson](#) warned:

*I know no safe depository of the ultimate powers of the society, but the people themselves: and if we think them not enlightened enough to exercise their control with a wholesome discretion, the remedy is, not to take it from them, but to inform their discretion by education.*

In a democratic society it is incumbent upon the scientific community to share their knowledge in a way that can be understood by everyone. Simply telling the American public, "Trust us, we know better than you when it comes to GMO technology," does less to help people understand the issues than ensure corporations can continue to make profits on technology that has yet to live up to its claimed potential.

The SA editors underestimate the American public, and what is driving their decisions. According to a [New York Times poll](#), about a quarter of Americans who support labeling were concerned about food safety. That leaves the vast majority basing their decision on many of the other controversial issues surrounding GMOs.

The SA editors write that, "antagonism toward GMO foods" poisons public opinion about the positive aspects of GMO foods, which deliver, "enormous benefits... and promises far more." There may be some truth to this statement, but the examples they use to bolster their arguments are one-sided and fail to address the very real concerns people all over the world have with GMO foods.

In fact, many of the SA editors' claims appear to ignore contradictory research along with socioeconomic and ethical implications of GMO crop production.

Let's start with SA editors' statement that conventional crops often require more pesticides and water than GMOs. When it comes to water-usage, the [Union of Concerned Scientists](#) say drought resistant seeds would provide marginal benefits— and may not outweigh the negative genetic interaction effects—which impact plant growth. [Food & Water Watch](#) points out that drought-resistant GMOs are not commercially tested. Biotech giant Monsanto says its [DroughtGard](#) seeds were just made available commercially for farmers in the Western Great Plains this season and has yet to release performance results.

In regards to pesticides, recent media reports seem to contradict the SA editors' claim that GMO crops often reduce pesticide use. According to [Reuters](#), a study recently published in the peer-reviewed journal *Environmental Sciences Europe* by a Washington State University professor found that genetically engineered crops are forcing farmers to use **more**, not less, pesticides, "to fight weeds and insects due largely to heavy adoption of genetically modified crop technologies that are sparking a rise of "superweeds" and hard-to-kill insects."

A recent [Associated Press investigation](#) out of Argentina brought to light the unintended consequences of biotechnology on the health of the people there. Argentina is now the third largest soy producer. According

to the *AP*, all the soy that comes from Argentina is genetically modified and apparently the vast majority of their cotton and corn are as well. According to the report:

*A government study there found alarming levels of agrochemical contamination in the soil and drinking water, and 80 percent of the children surveyed carried traces of pesticide in their blood.*

*The Associated Press documented dozens of cases around the country where poisons are applied in ways unanticipated by regulatory science or specifically banned by existing law. The spray drifts into schools and homes and settles over water sources; farmworkers mix poisons with no protective gear; villagers store water in pesticide containers that should have been destroyed.*

*Now doctors are warning that uncontrolled pesticide applications could be the cause of growing health problems among the 12 million people who live in the South American nation's vast farm belt.*

The *SA* editors wrote, "Recently published data from a seven-year study of Indian farmers show that those growing a genetically modified crop increased their yield per acre by 24 percent and boosted profits by 50 percent." It sounds great, but many Indian farmers are seeing very little increased profits. According to a story published last year in the [International Herald Tribune blog "India Ink,"](#) cotton farmers taking part in a United Nations summit meeting on GMOs in Hyderabad complained that while they have higher yields, they are not seeing increased profits and that their costs were spiking much faster than the price of cotton. One farmer reportedly said, "We buy seeds on the black market now, and we pay three times, sometimes five times, as much as we did for the normal seeds."

The *SA* editors failed to inform their readers that the Indian government made GMO labeling mandatory this year. In fact, GMO crops are at the center of a [bitter agricultural debate](#) in that country. The issue is so contentious that India's Parliamentary Standing Committee on Agriculture called on the nation last year to ban GMO food crops altogether.

A Supreme Court-appointed technical expert committee recommended India institute a 10-year moratorium on GMO field trials until they better understand the long-term health, environmental and economic impacts. These seem like important facts to leave out if the *SA* editors truly want to help readers fully understand the weightiness of the issues surrounding GMO crops.

The *SA* editors' touting of Golden Rice—genetically engineered rice designed to produce beta-carotene, a precursor of Vitamin A—overstates its potential benefits. Many well-respected experts, such as Marion Nestle, award-winning author and professor of Nutrition, Food Studies, and Public Health at New York University, question whether Golden Rice will be effective at all. Nestle recently restated her stance in her [Food Politics blog](#):

*Much of the promise of food biotechnology depends on its science, but the realities depend on social as well as scientific factors...The lack of vitamin A is the single most important cause of blindness among children in developing countries and a major contributor to deaths among malnourished children and adults...[but] Golden Rice is unlikely to have much commercial potential in developing countries.*

*... in many countries where vitamin A deficiency is common, food sources of beta-carotene are plentiful, but people believe the foods inappropriate for young children, do not cook them enough to make them digestible, or do not consume enough fat to permit much in the way of absorption. It remains to be seen whether the beta-carotene in Golden Rice will fare better under such circumstances.*

I was also disappointed to see SA editors cite an industry-funded report commissioned to help defeat California's Prop 37. Northbridge Environmental Management Consultants concluded that, "Prop 37 would have raised an average California family's yearly food bill by as much as \$400." Last year, the [San Jose Mercury News](#) determined that the reports findings were misleading, because, "...they are based on a questionable assumption—that the food industry will choose to use organic ingredients or ingredients that are not genetically engineered rather than use the new labels."

The SA editors make similar assumptions by concluding that because GMO foods are, "virtually impossible to find... in European supermarkets," a labeling law in the U.S. would lead to similar results and effectively "shun" continued development of GMO technology. The SA editors overlooked studies in [China](#), [Netherlands](#) and [France](#) that found label laws there did not significantly change consumers purchasing behaviors.

Even if their assumptions are true, it's a stretch to assume research will be impacted greatly. According to the [European Commission's 2010 report](#) on EU-funded GMO research Europe's "Bio-Economy," which refers to research, development and production, was worth about \$2.6 trillion annually.

I wonder if the SA editors had heard Dr. Louise O. Fresco, former Assistant-Director General of the FAO, offer the following warning to scientists about GMOs during a [keynote address](#) at the Conference on Crop and Forest Biotechnology for the Future in 2001. She said:

*If research is to address the challenges in agriculture, we need to put genetic modification in context, and realize that it is but one of the many elements of agricultural change. Scientists must not be blinded by the glamour of cutting-edge molecular science for its own sake.*

When it comes to food safety, most experts agree very little research exists that shows eating foods that contain GMOs negatively impact human health. Like most of the food we eat in the U.S., food safety tests are funded by the same companies that produce the products, making independent studies nearly impossible to conduct. Many scientists I've talked with agree that GMO foods are most likely safe to eat, but they believe much more independent long-term research must be conducted to make sure.

However, there are some studies that do raise concerns. For example, industry scientists claimed that the toxins or biopesticides created by genetically modified crops, approved only as animal feed, would never make it out of the digestive tract of the animals.

Apparently Bt toxins from GMO corn or possibly other GM crops are not only making it out the animals stomachs they are finding their way into people. [Researchers](#) in Canada found Bt toxins in [93 percent of blood samples](#) taken by 30 pregnant women in a Quebec hospital and 80 percent of the samples taken from umbilical cords tested positive. Scientists believe that the toxins made it into their bodies after they ate food products from animals fed genetically modified corn. So far scientists have not found that the Bt toxins have impacted anyone's health, but researchers believe many more studies are needed to determine long-

term health effects.

There are many other important facts and issues surrounding GMOs that the SA editors failed to mention; ranging from the controversies surrounding GMO [seed patents](#) to the well regarded Union of Concerned Scientists' [report](#) that found despite all they hype about its potential to feed the world, "genetic engineering has failed to significantly increase U.S. crop yields."

When American consumers buy a food product, health impacts, while very important, are not the only factors that lead them to their final purchasing decision. Labels such as Country of Origin, Fair Trade, or USDA Organic, all help consumers make well-informed purchasing decisions.

There may be legitimate reasons to argue against mandatory GMO labeling, but claims that Americans cannot be trusted to make rational decisions about what they want to feed themselves and their children is not one of them.

Bottom line: Americans want to know what's in their food and how it's produced, including those who regard themselves as "scientific" Americans.

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## 2 THOUGHTS ON "SCIENTIFIC AMERICAN EDITORS' GMO LABELING STANCE INSULTS AMERICANS"



alton craig klucas

on **November 7, 2013 at 5:20 pm** said:

Why would Scientific American be against informing the public, isn't the the whole purpose of the magazine? For pity's sake, how else are they distorting and misinforming the public. Scary, I won't buy that magazine any more.



**Nancy Jones**

on **November 7, 2013 at 8:19 pm** said:

What's the golden rule? Answer: the man with the gold makes the rules!!! Monsanto and its' cohorts donate millions to political campaigns and put millions more in politicians pockets. The whole fricking world id corrupt!!!

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Website by **SOUTH BEND**