

Consumers and their impact on food and farming systems in North America and Germany – Examples relating to GMO issues

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Abstract

Consumers in North America and Germany tried in different ways to impact their regional farmers, supermarkets, regional as well as national politicians, food related laws as well as food based land use systems in order to be able to continue consuming ge-free foods and to get sufficient information on all levels of the food chain enabling them to do so. As much success as consumers in the US and Germany had with the initiation and establishment of ge-free regions, US consumers did not succeed with their ge-food labelling campaigns. Only in Vermont a ge-seed Labelling law could be passed. In Germany ge-food, ge-feed and ge-seed have to be labelled by law. German Consumers and low input farmers tried to get also products derived from ge-feed included in ge-labelling laws. It seems a consumer influenced compromise that a new German legislation is about to be adopted which would allow for an easier Non-GMO-Labelling of food. Yet consumer opportunities to make informed choices about the food they eat seem to be still limited, especially in North America with the practical absence of federal ge-food, feed and seed labelling laws. Thus a few years ago, actors of the organic and natural food Industry teamed up to launch the so called Non-GMO Project, which shall soon open its Verification Program to the North American natural and organic food industry, offering a standard for ge-free or Non-GMO verification.

Introduction

Consumers directly and indirectly impact food and farming systems all over the world, e.g. by choosing where and what they buy, by requesting information about the food they eat (see e.g. Howard 2005), by voting for certain local food law initiatives (see e.g. Pick 2007) or certain regional and national politicians and their political (food) programs. Since a couple of years consumers in many regions of the world seem to be especially concerned about genetically modified plants and foods (about the difficulty to control GM plants see e.g. Clark 2004 or Brauner et al. 2002). Consumers can use a variety of influence possibilities to impact food and farming system and this paper tries to highlight the ones especially used by regional actors like consumers to successfully react on GMO issues in certain regions of North America and Germany.

Materials and methods

Expert Interviews in North America (California, Vermont, Ontario) and Germany (primarily in Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania and Baden-Wuerttemberg) together with literature surveys examined different levels of involvement, challenges faced and

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achievements of consumers and other regional actors initiating or participating in the process of creating ge-free regions, ge-labelling laws or ge-free supermarkets.

Results and Discussion

To arrange the various research results more clearly, they were displayed in Table 1 and will partially be explained and exemplified in the following paragraphs:

Tab. 1: Consumer impact on food and farming with regard to GMO issues

- Selection -

Consumer impact food and farming	Examples from North America	Examples from Germany
because a majority of consumers wishes to eat ge-free foods and wishes to protect natural Biodiversity of garden or farm seeds	54% of North Americans said 2006 they were unlikely to eat GMOs, 38% said they were likely to eat them*	74,9 % of German consumers do not want ge-foods 18,3 % were indifferent about GMO issues 2006 **
by lobbying their local, state and federal politicians for sufficient Labelling Laws	Oregon and California Labelling Initiatives Vermont Seed Labelling Law	Recommendations to improve existing Federal Labelling Laws for ge-foods to include products derived from ge-feed
by shopping in natural food Stores, Coops and organic supermarkets	North American organic food market is with about 14% the fastest growing in the world. Its sales were estimated to be 11.9 Bill. Euro in 2005***	Organic food sales in Europe was approx. 12,5 Billion Euro 2004 Germany was app. 3,5 with a growth of 13%***
by donating benefits to ge-free Initiatives	Members of the COOP Supermarket in Mendocino County	Donations of regional actors in Ueberlingen
by initiating and encouraging ge-free supermarket initiatives	Big Carrot Project later developed into the NON-GMO Project in North America	Edeka Projects in Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania
by voting for or encouraging county administrators and farmers to vote for ge-free counties	County Laws in Mendocino County, Marin County, Trinity County and Santa Cruz County	County Resolutions in Main-Tauber County Oberallgaeu County
by voting for or encouraging administrator to vote for ge-free cities	City of Eureka, California Town Resolutions in Vermont	Town Resolutions in the Town of Tuebingen Town of Reutlingen
by talking to the source of their food for further	consumer education events provided by Coop and organic	consumer education leaflets and movies

information	supermarkets in Mendocino or Marin County	provided by the ge-free region of Ueberlingen
by engaging in Community supported Agriculture	Community supported Agriculture in San Luis Obispo County (see also Strohlic 2004)	Farmer-consumer-networks, direct marketing
<p><u>Sources:</u> Expert Interviews in North America and Germany, *Pew Initiative on Food and Biotechnology 2006 ** gfk Market Research 2007, ***Willer and Youssefi 2006.</p>		

Consumers have been often successful in their efforts to impact GMO issues, as Table 1 shows. They initiated and/ or supported for instance the introduction of many County Laws in California. In four of these it is now prohibited to grow ge-plants commercially (for details see Pick 2006 and 2007). Consumers also impacted County Resolutions in Germany where the County administrators decided to lease County land only to such persons who will farm it without the use of ge-plants. Similar Resolutions have been passed for Towns in Germany and Vermont.

Regarding the labelling of GMOs, Consumers and other regional actors have not been as successful, especially in the United States. Whereas Consumers in Germany campaign for stricter versions of existing Labelling Laws for GMO' s which would include products derived from ge-feed, Consumers in North America have to cope with the practical absence of any kind of mandatory ge-food, feed or seed labelling, with one exemption. In the State of Vermont, consumers, farmers and their representatives succeeded a few years ago with their labelling initiative and as a result a seed labelling law for ge-seeds got passed, the first and only of its kind in the United States. Other, especially ge-food labelling initiatives like the one in Oregon failed to be successful due to highly financed and Biotech Industry dominated counter Initiatives.

Rather smaller natural and organic grocery stores in California and Ontario started in 2001 and 2003 - in response to their customers who were concerned about ge-foods - their own initiative to discover the GMO status of their food assortment. The aim was to offer the stores' consumers an informed choice. One organic coop supermarket, The Big Carrot, was found to be an international role model in its consistent way of working together with its food processors and wholesalers in order to keep the food assortment in the store ge-free. Whereas in Germany by contrast the investigated coop supermarkets like Edeka work directly with the farmers and obligate them to grow only ge-free seeds or feed their farm animals only ge-free food if they want to sell their produce under the supermarkets' brand.

The Big Carrot Natural Food Market in Toronto, Ontario implemented a non-GMO policy which simply discontinued those product lines that were not confirmed by the manufacturer to be non-GMO. But the absence of an authoritative standard for non-GMO created problems for this effort. In 2005, The Big Carrot teamed up with stores in California to form the Non-GMO Project, with the common goal of creating a standardized meaning of Non-GMO for the North American organic and natural food industry. (see also The Non-GMO Project 2007)

Since the spring of 2007, the Non-GMO Projects Board of Directors includes representatives from a lot of stakeholder groups of the natural product industry, like consumers, retailers, farmers, and manufacturers. Soon the Project expects to open its Verification Program to the industry, offering a Standard for non-GMO that is both meaningful and achievable. (see the Non-GMO Project 2007)

The implementation of any kind of label, especially one with such high oversight costs, has a tendency to higher the prices for the labelled products in this case for organic and natural food products. This kind of cost distribution is against the polluter pays principle. As much as consumers prefer to make an informed choice, they might not want to and should not have to pay for these extra costs which will likely arise.

Conclusions

Consumers tried in different ways to impact relevant actors and actions in order to be able to continue consuming ge-free foods and to be able to continue choosing from the natural and organic Biodiversity of garden seeds to plant in their garden. Therefore they need sufficient information on all levels of the food chain, including labelled seeds, enabling them to do so. Whereas in Germany consumers can make somewhat informed choices if they want to avoid ge-food, feed and seed, informed consumer choices in North America are more difficult in this regard. Although the vast majority of Consumers would prefer GMO's to be labelled, the Federal Governments of the United States and Canada do not consider mandatory labelling of these crop seeds, food and feed. In this Environment, the organic and natural food Industry of North America networked together and formed the Non-GMO Project Initiative for Non- GMO verification in order to be able to provide consumers at least with some kind of GMO related Verification. Its purpose is to protect organic and natural products from GMO contamination by setting certain standards. One question that remains open is who should pay for these GMO-related extra costs. The polluter pays principle would require that this is not the natural or organic food or seed consumer.

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