

Mandatory Versus Voluntary Labeling of Genetically Modified Food, Consumer Choice, and Autonomy: Reply

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In their comment “Choice Versus Autonomy in the GM Food Labeling Debate,” philosophers Robert Streiffer and Alan Rubel (hereafter referred to as “S&R”) argue that our article on genetically modified (GM) food labeling (Carter & Gruère, 2003) “misses the mark because of the important differences between choice, informed choice, and autonomy” (Streiffer & Rubel, 2003). They argue that we used improper terminology; they state that our “claim” was wrongly based on consumer choice—not autonomy—and that we did not address the policy implications. They conclude by suggesting the overwhelming support shown in consumer surveys for mandatory labeling in the United States means that the US Congress should not even consider market outcomes. Congress may violate public preferences, but S&R conclude that “the narrow economic considerations that Carter and Gruère discuss are certainly not sufficient to do so.” In this reply, we respond to their various criticisms.

First, we want to clarify the purpose of our paper. Our paper offered a positive economic analysis based on international observations: The European Union (EU), Japan, and Australia have implemented mandatory GM labeling systems, and as a result, there is no consumer choice at the retail level (see references in Carter & Gruère, 2003). Based on these observations, we arrived at some general conclusions regarding the value of mandatory labeling. At no point in our paper did we make an explicit claim or prediction about what would happen in the United States if mandatory labeling were adopted. We believe that given outcomes in other OECD countries, mandatory labeling may have a similar effect in the United States, but this type of prediction was not a goal of our paper. When referring to our conclusions, S&R employ the word *claim* six times in their comment—each time erroneously.

Secondly, we would like to address S&R’s main criticisms regarding the terminology employed by us and the conflicting meanings of autonomy, consumer choice, and informed consumer choice. First, S&R criticize our use of the term *informed consumer choice*. In our paper, these words appeared as a direct quote from a speech given by David Byrne, the EU Commissioner for Health

and Consumer Protection. In addition, the terms *consumer choice* and *informed consumer choice* are used repetitively in this global debate by policymakers and nongovernmental organizations lobbying for mandatory labeling in the United States and elsewhere. These are their words, and in our paper, we explained why their claim of benefits from mandatory labeling does not match the actual outcome.

Unlike S&R, we think the idea of consumer choice (in a rational sense) tends to matter for consumers and policymakers considering a costly labeling system which will be paid for by taxpayers and consumers. Consumers will most likely oppose a costly labeling system that does not provide any visible labels. We acknowledge that autonomy should matter in the debate over GM food labeling. We understand that the autonomy of the consumer provides a reason to support mandatory labeling rather than no labeling at all. However, it does not contradict our main conclusion on mandatory labeling of GM food versus voluntary labeling of non-GM food. Voluntary labeling provides consumer choice via market forces, as the numerous cases of organic, country-of-origin, and “ecolabels” demonstrate. Consumers who do not want GM food will reveal their demand under a voluntary labeling scheme. If there is sufficient demand for non-GM products, processors and retailers will avoid GM ingredients and voluntarily label their product non-GM. Some observers believe that this outcome will soon be observed in Canada, where some food processors have said they will label their products as non-GM as soon as the voluntary labeling policy is implemented (Inter/Sect Alliance, 2002). In contrast, mandatory labeling provides autonomy but not necessarily consumer choice (as in the EU). The EU’s de facto market ban can be justified in terms of consumers’ interests as long as all consumers are willing to pay a premium (or a tax) to avoid GM food altogether. Yet a recent French economic study shows that EU consumers may be willing to buy GM food products for a lower price (Noussair, Robin, & Ruffieux, 2004), so mandatory labeling will not satisfy all consumers.

Regarding the policy implications of our paper, S&R base their argument on a few public opinion polls in the

United States. In contrast to Miller (2003), S&R believe that GM food policy should be driven by public perception rather than science. What is the value of surveys designed simply to ask consumers whether or not they want mandatory labeling of GM food? A priori, one would expect everyone to answer yes unconditionally, as a way of acquiring information, choice, and autonomy. However, what if the survey mentioned a likely taxpayer cost and/or a price increase, and the fact that mandatory labeling may not result in any choice or visible labels at the retail level? We contend that this more accurate survey would give different results, and we refer S&R to the fact that 73% of the voters on Measure 27 in Oregon in November 2002 rejected GM mandatory labeling. One fundamental implication of our paper was that many public surveys on GM labeling may be misleading if not interpreted carefully, and they should be complemented by processor and retailer surveys to facilitate a valid prediction of any policy outcome.

Finally, we did not address the precise political target of our message. Every argument on this issue deserves to be heard, and what S&R call “narrow economic considerations” matter as much as any ethical or philosophical view. We believe that it would indeed be narrow to base arguments on hypothetical claims of market outcomes and to ignore the facts.

To conclude, the comments on our paper by philosophers Streiffer and Rubel are valuable in the sense that they add another dimension to the debate. However, S&R do not reduce the contribution of our positive anal-

ysis. Nor do their comments reduce the validity of our conclusions on the value of mandatory as opposed to voluntary labeling of GM food, which build on the arguments of other agricultural economists (Runge & Jackson, 2000; Valceschini, 1998).

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