

**Testimony of David B. Schmidt, President and CEO,  
International Food Information Council  
Hearing on the Costs and Impacts of Mandatory Biotechnology Laws  
U.S. House Committee on Agriculture  
March 24, 2015**

[[Slide 1]] Chairman Conaway, distinguished Members, my name is David Schmidt, and I'm president and CEO of the International Food Information Council, or IFIC. [[Slide 2]]

Our mission is to communicate science-based information on food safety and nutrition issues to health professionals, journalists, educators and government officials. We are fortunate to receive support for our programs from leading food, beverage and agricultural companies, but I must clarify that we don't represent those industries.

Thank you for inviting me to speak today regarding US consumer attitudes toward food biotechnology and related aspects, such as labeling.

Last year, IFIC conducted the [2014 Consumer Perceptions of Food Technology Survey](#). It was our 16<sup>th</sup> such survey since 1997, and it has offered trended US consumer insights on plant and animal biotechnology and labeling longer than any publicly available data.

### **Survey Methodology**

Let me begin with the methodology, which can be found in the slides that are included after my written remarks. The public can access the full text of the survey's questions and answers, along with many other educational resources, at [foodinsight.org/biotech](http://foodinsight.org/biotech). [[Slide 3]]

The 2014 IFIC Food Technology Survey polled 1,000 adults who are reflective of the U.S. population, according to the US Census Bureau, and had just a 3 percent margin of error.

Our survey begins with open-ended questions, which are more reliable when it comes to taking the real pulse of consumers than surveys with a small number of carefully worded questions designed to provoke concerns.

We believe this technique yields a more accurate view of what is most important to Americans. Throughout 18 years of conducting this research, we have not seen consumer perceptions about food biotechnology change dramatically. When it comes to food labels, the results show that biotechnology, or even "GMOs," is not a top-of-mind concern for the vast majority of consumers.

Following the open-ended questions, we get more specific about biotechnology and genetic engineering, but please note that we do not use the term "GMO" for two major reasons:

- 1) The US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has provided labeling guidance to industry, reaffirmed as recently as April 2013, that the scientifically accurate terms are “bioengineered,” “genetically engineered,” or “foods produced using biotechnology.” Their analysis considers the term “genetically modified organism” or “GMO” as potentially misleading to consumers, because it is a distinction without a difference. Humans have been genetically modifying crops and animals for tens of thousands of years, but through far less precise or efficient methods than we enjoy today.
- 2) Our own consumer research since the early 1990s has found “GMO” to be off-putting at best or even frightening to many consumers. And unfortunately in today’s marketplace, it is used as something to avoid and a pejorative, rather than a way to inform consumers.

And now to the survey itself, and I would note that this is the precise order in which the questions were posed.

### **Foods Avoided and Food Label Information**

We first asked if people were avoiding any particular foods or ingredients in their diet. *[[Slide 4]]* Only 2 percent of total respondents mentioned biotech food—or even similar terms like the aforementioned “GMOs.”

Then we asked them if they could think of any information that currently isn’t on food labels but should be. *[[Slide 5]]* Three-quarters said “no.” Out of the total sample, just 4 percent said that labels should carry information about genetic engineering or related terms. This is a number that has barely budged over the history of our survey.

### **Food Safety**

Next was the topic of food safety. *[[Slide 6]]* Two-thirds of Americans said they were confident in the safety of the food supply. This number has remained consistently high since 2008, which might come as a surprise to some, given the tone and tenor of the rhetoric that surrounds us. Only 13 percent said they’re not confident, while 20 percent were neutral.

*[[Slide 7]]* When we asked people about their specific food safety concerns, “biotech” or any related term was far down the list at 7 percent. Remember, these questions are designed to reveal top-of-mind insights, not to guide people to a desired outcome. That number, while small, has indeed risen a few percentage points since 2008, which is undoubtedly a reflection of the heated communications environment.

Conversely, the food safety threats that most concern consumers, both today and in past surveys, revolve around diseases and contamination, along with food handling and preparation—both of which were mentioned by 18 percent of respondents. That was followed by 12 percent who cited preservatives and chemicals, and 10 percent who mentioned agriculture production issues.

## **General Impressions of Food Biotechnology**

[[Slide 8]] When we asked the respondents to offer their impressions of food biotechnology (before mentioning any benefits), there was an almost even split between 28 percent who were favorable to the technology and 29 percent who were unfavorable. More than four in 10 were either neutral or didn't know enough to offer a response.

### **Consumer Trust**

As with much of our other consumer research, the 2014 IFIC Food Technology Survey then asked about which sources of information on food biotechnology consumers trust most. [[Slide 9]]

Health organizations, cited by 50 percent of respondents ranked first, followed by Federal government agencies and health professionals, at 45 percent each.

Farmers rated highly for 39 percent of respondents, while scientists were among the most trusted sources of 33 percent.

At the other end of the spectrum, journalists, bloggers, and celebrities were trusted by consumers only in the single digits.

### **Benefits of Food Biotechnology**

At this point, we focused on attitudes toward particular benefits of food biotechnology. [[Slide 10]] When consumers became aware that some products on the market or in the pipeline offered nutrition and health-related benefits, they were overwhelmingly positive.

Referring back to my point on language above, it is not surprising that consumers may shy away when provoked to be concerned about “genetically modified organisms in your food.” But notice the difference in support when we use more informative language to explain some of the benefits of the technology:

- 72 percent said they were likely to purchase products made with oils modified by biotechnology to provide more healthful fats.
- 69 percent were likely to buy such products if they were modified to reduce the potential for carcinogens—the same number who would buy products if they were modified to be protected from insect damage and to require fewer pesticide applications.
- 69 percent also said they would buy bread, crackers, cookies, cereals, or pasta made with flour modified to use less land, water, and/or pesticides.

The list goes on, with positive perceptions of foods modified to provide enhanced nutritional benefits, eliminate trans fat content, improve vitamin content, or taste better or fresher.

### **Current FDA Labeling Policy**

[[Slide 11]] Next, we returned to labeling issues and tried to get at consumers' attitudes another way, by asking whether people favored the current FDA policy regarding foods produced using biotechnology. We told them the policy requires special labeling "only when biotechnology's use substantially changes the food's nutritional content, or when a potential safety issue such as a food allergen is identified. Otherwise, special labeling is not required."

Sixty-three percent of respondents supported the current FDA policy, while 19 percent opposed it. The number of those who are opposed to the policy has risen a few points in recent years, while support has remained mostly steady. In fact, every survey we have conducted since 1997 has found a strong majority of Americans support this FDA labeling policy.

### **Consumers' Favored Uses**

When we looked more generally at the most favored uses of food biotechnology, reducing pesticide applications topped the list, followed by keeping food prices stable, and helping feed undernourished people around the world. [[Slide 12]]

Close behind those favored uses were food crops that can survive in extreme climates, and the reduced use of nonrenewable resources in food production.

### **Conclusion**

Mr. Chairman, in closing, let me emphasize that in our nearly two decades of consumer research, we've learned that consumers are supportive of the many benefits of food and agricultural biotechnology when clearly articulated.

The food label is not a playground for every bit of information someone might want to know. We rely on the FDA to ensure that the precious real estate available on a food label is reserved for important health, ingredient, and nutrition information, and it is clear that a strong majority of Americans have confidence in the FDA's labeling policy for foods produced using biotechnology.

[[Slide 13]] The International Food Information Council would be pleased to offer you or your staff any additional resources in support of my testimony, as well as the work we do on food biotechnology and other issues. Thank you once again for this opportunity.

Slide 1



# 2014 Consumer Perceptions of Food Technology Survey

**David B. Schmidt**

**President & CEO**

**International Food Information Council**

Testimony to US House Agriculture Committee on

*Cost and Impacts of Mandatory Biotechnology Labelling Laws*

10 a.m., March 24, 2015



Slide 2



## International Food Information Council (IFIC)



**Mission:** *To effectively communicate science-based information about food safety and nutrition to health and nutrition professionals, government officials, educators, journalists, and consumers.*

Primarily supported by the broad-based food, beverage, and agricultural industries.

## Methodology

- Sampled from the population of U.S. adults (18+)
- All studies weighted to be nationally representative
- Conducted via web
- Statistical significance determined at the 95% confidence level
- Margin of error is +/- 3% for total sample and +/- 7% for Moms/Millennials oversample.

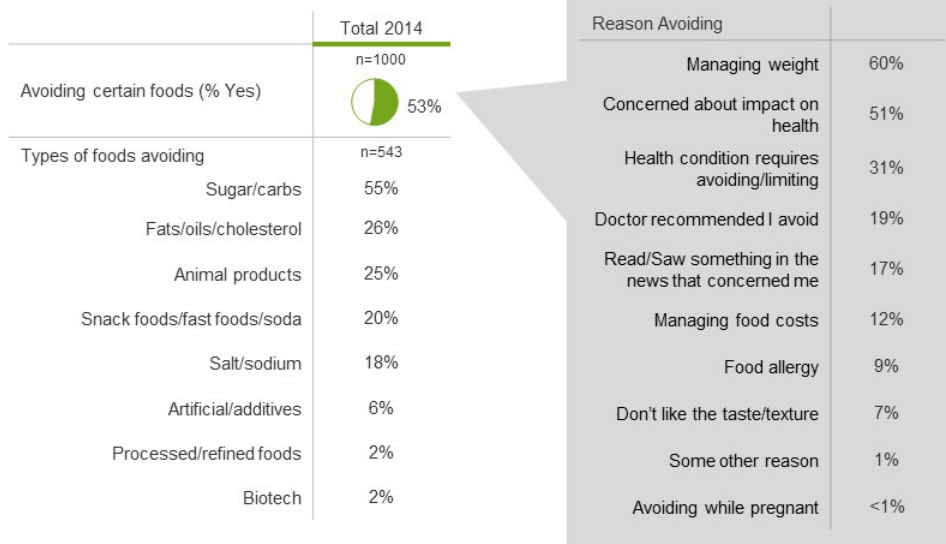
Study Composition	2014	2012	2010	2008
Population:	U.S. adults (18+)			
Sample:	n=1000	n=750	n=750	n=1000
Date:	Mar 28-April 7	Mar. 7-19	Apr. 5-26	July 29 – Aug. 18
Weighted on:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Gender</li> <li>• Age</li> <li>• Race</li> <li>• Education</li> <li>• Marital status</li> <li>• Region</li> <li>• Income (only for 2014 and 2012)</li> </ul>			

Research firm: Market Strategies International (Livonia, Michigan)



## Foods Avoided/Reasons Avoiding Certain Foods

- Just over 50 percent of Americans report avoiding certain foods/ingredients, consistent from previous years. Sugars and Carbs continue to lead the list of foods consumers say they're limiting/avoiding.

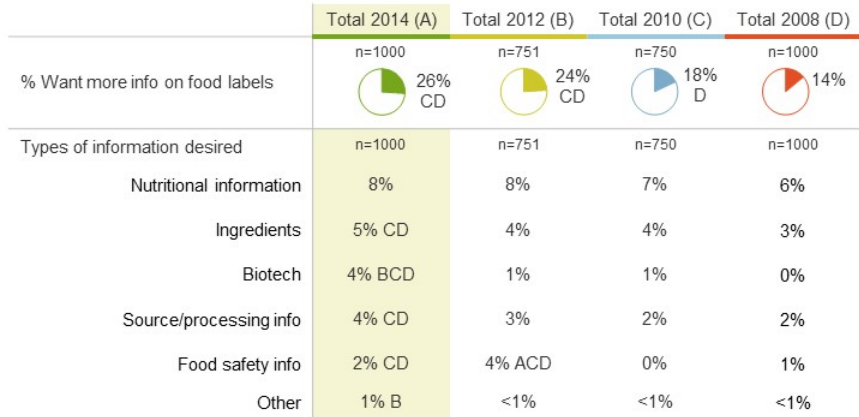


Q7. Thinking about your diet over the past few months, are there any foods or ingredients that you have avoided or eaten less of?  
 Q8\_2. [IF AVOIDED FOODS] Why have you avoided these foods/ingredients?  
 Q8\_2. Why have you avoided these foods/ingredients?



## Interest in Adding Information to Current Food Labels

- Only one-quarter of consumers would like additional information on the label.
- Of those, nutrition and ingredient information, as well as biotech and source/processing information, are mentioned.



A/B/C/D indicate statistical significance between years

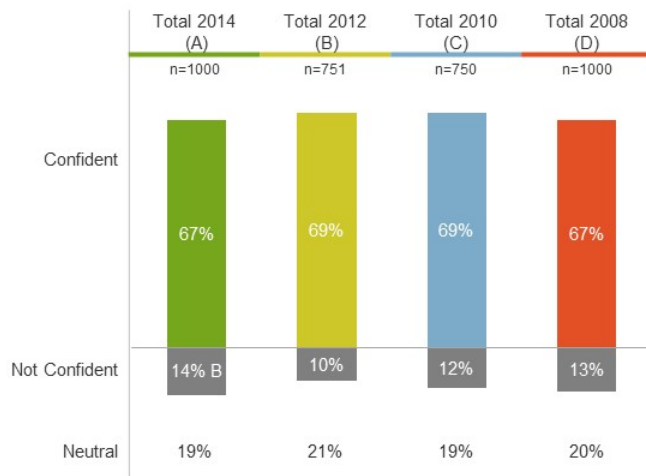
Q9. Can you think of any information that is not currently included on food labels that you would like to see on food labels?

Q10. [F YES] What types of information would that be? [OPEN END]



## Confidence in the Food Supply

- Confidence in the U.S. food supply remains consistently high since 2008.



A/B/C/D indicate statistical significance between years

Q11. How confident are you about the safety of the US food supply? Would you say...?



## Food Safety Concerns

- Disease/contamination and handling/prep are still the most mentioned food safety concerns, although to a lesser degree than previous years.

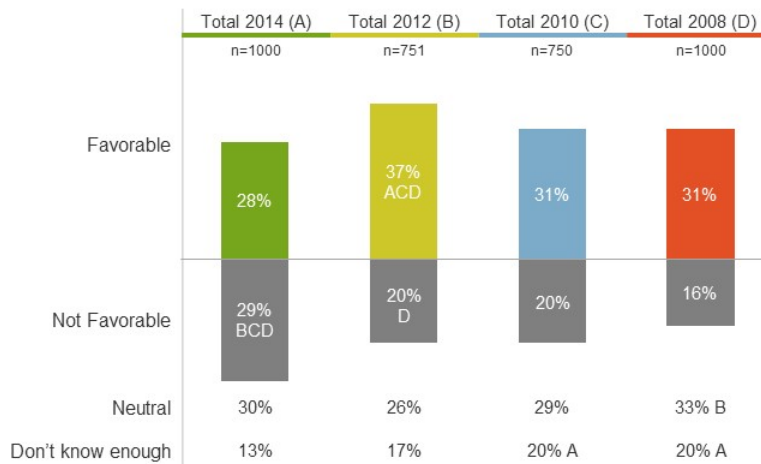
Food safety concerns	Total 2014 (A) n=1000	Total 2012 (B) n=751	Total 2010 (C) n=750	Total 2008 (D) n=1000
Disease/contamination	18%	29% A	29% A	38% ABC
Handling/preparation	18%	21%	23% AD	17%
Preservatives/Chemicals	12% D	13% CD	8% D	6%
Agricultural production	10% CD	7%	7%	5%
Packaging/labeling	9% BCD	5% D	4%	2%
Health/nutrition	7% D	8% D	6%	4%
Biotech	7% BCD	2%	2%	1%
Food sources	6%	7%	8%	9% A
Processed foods	3% BCD	1%	1%	1%
Other	3% CD	1%	1%	<1%

A/B/C/D indicate statistical significance between years  
 Q12. What, if anything, are you concerned about when it comes to food safety? [OPEN END]



## Impressions of Food Biotechnology

- Just over one-quarter (28%) of consumers are favorable toward using biotechnology, with the same number being unfavorable, a significant change from 2012.



A/B/C/D indicate statistical significance between years  
 Q14. What is your overall impression of using biotechnology with plants that produce food products? Would you say you are...?





## Health professionals are top trusted sources for information about food biotechnology

Preferred source (total ranked 1 <sup>st</sup> -3 <sup>rd</sup> )	Total 2014 n=1000
Food Biotechnology	
Health organization	50%
Government agency	45%
Health professional	45%
Farmer	35%
Scientist	30%
Friends/family	22%
Nonprofit organization	20%
Grocery store, drug store, or specialty store	10%
Product manufacturer	10%
Veterinarian	10%
Journalist	9%
Blogger	7%
Celebrity	5%



Q19. Which of the following sources, if any, do you or would you trust for information on biotechnology? Rank your top three.

## Likelihood to Purchase Plant Biotech Foods

- Consumers show high interest in nutrition & health-related benefits of food biotechnology.
- Nearly three-quarters of Americans say they are likely to purchase foods made with oils modified to provide more healthful fats, such as Omega-3s.

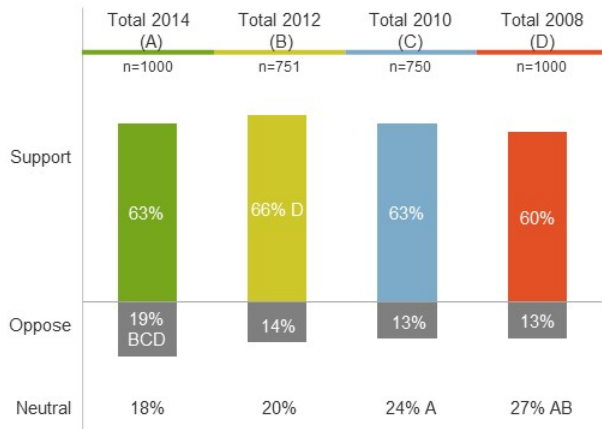
Total 2014 (n=1000)	Not Likely	Likely
Food product made with oils modified by biotechnology to provide more healthful fats, like Omega-3, in the food	28%	72%
Variety of produce modified by biotechnology to reduce the potential for carcinogens (n=501)	31%	69%
Variety of produce modified by biotechnology to be protected from insect damage and required fewer pesticide applications	31%	69%
Bread, crackers, cookies, cereals, or pasta made with flour modified to use less land, water, and/or pesticides	31%	69%
Bread, crackers, cookies, cereals, or pasta made with flour modified to enhance nutritional benefits	33%	67%
Food product made with oils modified by biotechnology to eliminate the trans fat content in the food*	33%	67%
Variety of produce modified by biotechnology to improve vitamin content (n=499)	35%	65%
Variety of produce modified by biotechnology to taste better or fresher	42%	58%

\*Note: Wording change from 2012 - "reduce the saturated fat content"  
 A/B indicate statistical significance between years  
 PB5, Q25 Q22 Q23. All other things being equal, how likely would you be to buy...



## FDA Food Labeling

- The majority of Americans support the current FDA policy for labeling of foods produced through biotechnology, although the percentage who oppose is higher than in 2012.



A/B/C/D indicate statistical significance between years

Q28. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) requires special labeling when a food is produced under certain conditions: When biotechnology's use substantially changes the food's nutritional content, like vitamins or fat, or its composition; or when a potential safety issue, such as a food allergen, is identified. Otherwise, special labeling is not required. Would you say that you support, or oppose this FDA policy?



## Most Favored Uses of Biotechnology

- Reducing pesticide applications, keeping food prices stable, and helping feed undernourished globally are the top three favored uses of biotechnology.

Most favored uses of biotech	Total 2014 n=1000			
	Total Ranked 1 <sup>st</sup> -3 <sup>rd</sup>	Ranked 1 <sup>st</sup>	Ranked 2 <sup>nd</sup>	Ranked 3 <sup>rd</sup>
Reducing the amount of pesticide applications.	48%	18%	18%	12%
Keeping food prices stable.	41%	16%	11%	13%
Helping feed undernourished people around the world.	38%	16%	10%	11%
Developing food crops that can survive in extreme climates [e.g. drought, flood, etc.]	37%	11%	14%	13%
Preserving food availability by protecting crops from disease.	35%	12%	13%	10%
Reducing our use of nonrenewable resources in food production.	26%	5%	10%	12%
Protecting wildlife habitats by using existing land to grow.	26%	9%	10%	8%
Reducing greenhouse gas emissions.	18%	5%	5%	8%
Requiring fewer animals for food production.	15%	4%	4%	7%
Reducing the carbon footprint of food.	10%	2%	4%	4%

V3. Which of the following would you be most in favor of using food biotechnology to assist in? Rank your top three.





**Thank You**



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