

ANSWERS TO ESTIMATES QUESTIONS ON NOTICE

HEALTH AND AGEING PORTFOLIO

Supplementary Budget Estimates 2010-2011, 20 October 2010

Question: E10-006

OUTCOME 1: Population Health

Topic: SUBSTANTIAL EQUIVALENCE OF GM FOODS

Written Question on Notice

Senator Siewert asked:

- a) Can you confirm that in Standard 1.5.2 both the requirements to label GM foods and the exemptions from labelling GM foods both rely on the concept of ‘substantial equivalence’?
- b) Does this mean that processed foods which contain refined GM ingredients – such as vegetable oils, starches and sugars - may remain silent about this fact and are not required to label their products GM, provided no identifiable GM DNA or protein can be routinely detected in the end product?

Answer:

- a) ‘Substantial equivalence’ is an historical term used in the safety assessment of GM food. The term is not relevant in relation to current labelling requirements. GM foods are required to be labelled if they:
 - (i) Have altered characteristics. Altered characteristics mean that if the GM food is significantly different from its conventional counterpart with respect to allergenicity, toxicity, nutritional impact or end use, it must be identified on the label as being ‘genetically modified’.
 - (ii) Do not exhibit significant compositional or nutritional changes and are only different with respect to the presence of novel DNA and/or novel protein.

Labelling requirements are determined as part of FSANZ’s approval process of a GM food.

- b) Highly refined GM food (other than those with altered characteristics), where the effect of the refining process is to remove novel DNA and/or novel protein, do not require GM labelling as they are analytically indistinguishable from conventionally produced foods. In contrast, highly refined GM food that has altered characteristics must be labelled ‘genetically modified’ irrespective of the presence or absence of GM material in the final food.