

## FLASH REPORT

 **MONEY IN  
POLITICS  
PROJECT**



## REPORT #7

### GMO Labeling:

Will the GMO industry's investment in Maine politics will be enough to overcome the support for making Maine the first state to require GMO labeling?





## ABOUT THIS SERIES

The Money in Politics Project is a series of twelve reports about the role and effect of money on Maine politics. The reports combine a review of publicly available campaign finance data with on-the-ground analysis of how money influences Maine's elections, government, and public policy. **Maine Citizens for Clean Elections** launched this project because money in politics is an issue of vital concern to the people of Maine, one that goes to the heart of our democratic system.



The *Money in Politics Project* is a program of **Maine Citizens for Clean Elections**, a nonpartisan organization that has been working in the public interest to advocate for, increase public support for, defend and improve the Maine Clean Election Act and related campaign finance law since 1995. MCCE is a 501(c)(3) organization.

The *Money in Politics Project* team includes Andrew Bossie, John Brautigam, Ann Luther, BJ McCollister, and Alison Smith. MCCE appreciates the efforts of many others whose contributions enhanced this report.

MCCE welcomes your comments, questions, and suggestions. Please contact us at:

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## GMO Labeling

Over the last several years the Maine Legislature has considered a number of bills relating to genetically modified agricultural products. Many of those bills have addressed the question of whether food products containing genetically modified organisms or “GMOs” should be labeled as such, ensuring public access to information about genetically modified ingredients in the food stream. Currently, sixty-four countries have laws mandating the labeling of GMO foods<sup>1</sup>.

The American public appears to strongly support GMO labeling, with nationwide polls showing 80% to 90% in favor and only a small percentage opposed<sup>2</sup>. At the federal level, the bipartisan Genetically Engineered Food Right-to-Know Act was recently introduced in the Senate and House.

For the moment, this public support seems to be translating into legislative momentum. No state has yet enacted legislation to require GMO labeling, but bills are under consideration in 20 states this year. In the current Maine Legislature the principal GMO labeling bill (LD 718) has garnered 123 co-sponsors — two-thirds of all sitting Senators and Representatives.

But if history is any guide, public support for GMO labeling does not ensure enactment of LD 718. Prior to 2001 the legislature rejected three GMO labeling bills<sup>3</sup>. In 2001 proponents of labeling, including environmental, consumer, and certain agricultural interests, made a major push but met stiff opposition from businesses such as food manufacturers, biotech companies, and seed and herbicide manufacturers. The GMO labeling bill introduced in 2001 was defeated.

One reason for the difficulty in enacting such a popular measure may be the financial clout of labeling opponents and their overwhelming advantage in campaign contributions. These campaign contributions are intended to shape the

1. <http://www.centerforfoodsafety.org/ge-map/>

2. [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/03/04/gmo-poll\\_n\\_2807595.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/03/04/gmo-poll_n_2807595.html)

3. “Food Labeling Measure Sparks Debate,” *Bangor Daily News*, March 30, 2001.

legislature to be more favorable to their positions and/or to gain and keep access to lawmakers.

Opponents of labeling have deep pockets, as demonstrated by the California Prop 37 ballot question campaign in 2012. Opponents of Prop 37 spent \$45.9 million, while supporters spent \$10.3 million. The ballot question favoring GMO labeling was defeated.

This report reviews some of the campaign contributions given by the two sides in Maine’s longstanding GMO labeling debate. This is only a snapshot of records from the Ethics Commission’s database, but it reveals the role that money can play in advance of important, high-profile legislative debates.

Dollars spent by Opponents and Proponents of GMO Labeling in California in 2012 (Prop 37)



## Players in the GMO Debate

To identify the supporters and opponents of GMO labeling, the Money in Politics Project reviewed records of lobbying activities on various GMO bills over the past several years, as well as publicly available membership lists of one of the leading proponent organizations (Maine Organic Farmers and Gardeners Association or “MOFGA”) and one of the leading opponent organizations (the Biotechnology Industry Organization or “BIO”). Lists of contributors in the Prop 37 campaign were also reviewed<sup>4</sup>.

### MAINE CONSERVATION VOTERS

MCV is active on a variety of environmental, energy, and public health issues in Maine. The organization’s web site hosts a petition to support GMO labeling. \$7,472 in political contributions were identified from MCV. Contributions to unrelated ballot issues were not included.

## GMO Labeling Supporters and Allies

MOFGA’s Board of Directors announced that GMO labeling is a “strategic priority” for the organization in 2013. In addition to MOFGA, organizations and associations that have historically favored GMO labeling in Maine include the Environmental Health Strategy Center, Maine Conservation Voters, the Natural Resources Council of Maine, Food for Maine’s Future, Consumers’ Union, and the Institute for Responsible Technology.

Excluding unrelated ballot campaigns, the only one of these entities to make political contributions in Maine in the last twelve years was the Maine Conservation Voters, which gave \$7,472.

Additional contributions were found when reviewing MOFGA’s membership list of 215 Maine businesses. Green Thumb Farms and Royal River Natural Foods are typical companies in MOFGA that gave contributions. Taken together, a total of \$27,276 in contributions from GMO labeling advocates and their allies were identified.

4. Companies and organizations were excluded from the analysis where GMO labeling did not appear to be a priority of the company or organization notwithstanding minor involvement with GMO legislation in Maine and/or contributions relating to Prop 37. Examples include Wal-Mart, Rite Aid, the SEIU and the National Education Association. A contributor is included in this analysis only where the name on the Ethics Commission database matches the name on one of the membership lists. Errors or discrepancies in either database might result in omission of contributors.

## Contributions from GMO Labeling Supporters and MOFGA Members

Maine Conservation Voters	\$7,472
MOFGA Members	\$19,804

### GREEN THUMB FARMS

Potatoes from Green Thumb Farms are used in Cold River Vodka, a sought-after premium spirit made in Maine. It is not clear from the company’s website whether their products are GMO-free or whether the company supports LD 718. Green Thumb Farms gave \$325 since 2001, primarily to Republican recipients.

### ROYAL RIVER NATURAL FOODS

Like many other natural food stores, Royal River Natural Foods supports GMO labeling. The store’s website features an article stating that the “dirty little secret” of the GMO industry is that GMO food has “no better taste, no better nutrition, no lower price.” The Freeport food store contributed only \$70 to political campaigns in Maine.

## GMO Labeling Opponents and Allies

In addition to BIO, entities that have historically opposed GMO labeling include the Monsanto Company, the Grocery Manufacturers Association (“GMA”), the Maine Farm Bureau, and the Maine Potato Board. This analysis uncovered \$280,850 given by these opponents of GMO labeling in Maine and their allies.

Several high-profile lobbyists are working the State House on LD 718. Severin Beliveau represents MOFGA in support of the bill, while Robert Tardy represents BIO and Jim Mitchell represents GMA, both opposing the bill. These lobbyists are themselves major contributors on behalf of a wide array of clients in addition to those interested in LD 718. Their contributions and those of their firms are not specifically analyzed here.

### MONSANTO

President Obama angered many advocates of GMO labeling by naming Michael R. Taylor, a former executive at Monsanto, to be the FDA Deputy Commissioner for Foods. According to [Opensecrets.org](http://Opensecrets.org), federal contributions from Monsanto’s PAC and employees totaled \$1,034,064 in 2012, including \$23,725 to President Obama. Monsanto is a member of both BIO and GMA, and contributed \$8,112,866 to defeat Prop 37 in California — more than any other company. Ethics Commission records show that Monsanto has given \$65,350 in recent Maine elections.

### Contributions from GMO Labeling Opponents and Allies

Grocery Manufacturers Assn.	\$87,400
Monsanto	\$65,350
Maine Beverage Association	\$60,000
Coca-Cola Company	\$25,000
McCain Foods USA	\$20,100
Kellogg	\$10,000
Kraft Foods	\$7,000
DuPont	\$6,000

### MCCAIN FOODS USA

McCain Foods is based in Illinois but has approximately 550 employees in and around Easton, Maine. The company sells frozen French fries, tater tots, patties, hash browns, curly fries and waffle fries. Potato plants have been genetically modified in the past, so a GMO labeling bill could impact McCain Foods. The company has given \$20,100 in recent Maine elections and gave over \$50,000 to defeat Prop 37.

### Contributions from GMO Labeling Opponents Far Exceeded Contributions from GMO Labeling Proponents



### GROCERY MANUFACTURERS ASSOCIATION

Although sometimes confused as an advocate for retail grocery stores, GMA is actually the industry association for large food manufacturers such as General Mills, Kellogg, and Kraft Foods. In 2012 a GMA spokesperson said that defeating GMO labeling legislation was its “highest priority.” GMA made contributions of \$87,400 in Maine over the last twelve years.

## Money in the GMO Debate — The Bottom Line

Public support for GMO labeling seems to be growing in Maine and the country. The Money in Politics Project takes no position on the issue or on LD 718 itself. But only one side in the debate relies heavily on political contributions to bolster its case and improve its reception among lawmakers. Campaign finance data shows that businesses opposed to GMO labeling have given generously in Maine political campaigns, while the major supporters of this legislation have not. Only time — and the legislative vote on LD 718 — will tell whether the GMO industry’s investment in Maine politics will be enough to overcome the broad popular support for making Maine the first state to require GMO labeling.





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