THE ANNENBERG
PUBLIC POLICY CENTER
OF THE UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
August 3, 2016
Contact: Michael Rozansky | michael.rozansky@appc.upenn.edu | 215-746-0202

Will Americans use QR codes to learn whether food products are genetically modified?

PHILADELPHIA – A new law allows food producers to use digital codes to inform consumers that food contains genetically modified (GM) ingredients. But will consumers use smartphones or in-store readers to scan those Quick Response or QR codes?

Four in 10 Americans say that it is either somewhat or very likely that they would use their mobile phones or in-store scanners to learn whether a product contained GM ingredients, according to a new Annenberg Science Knowledge (ASK) survey by the Annenberg Public Policy Center (APPC) of the University of Pennsylvania and the Department of Human Ecology at Rutgers University. But 21 percent say that it is not too likely that they would do so and 38 percent say that it is not likely at all, the survey found.

GM foods have been on the market in the United States for 20 years. The legislation approved by Congress on July 14 requires, for the first time, that food products in the United States containing genetically modified ingredients carry identifying labels. The bill calls for the use of on-package text, a symbol designed by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), or an electronic or digital link such as a QR code, which when scanned or read by a smartphone or an in-store reader would connect consumers to a website with more information.

"The question is whether consumers will use QR codes to find out whether food products on store shelves have GM ingredients," said William K. Hallman, a 2016-2017 visiting scholar at APPC and professor in the Department of Human Ecology at Rutgers.

The ASK survey of 1,011 U.S. adults was conducted July 21-25, before President Barack Obama signed the labeling law on July 29.

Twenty-nine percent of Americans report that they have already used their mobile phones or a store scanner to scan UPC or QR codes to find the price of a product, or to check out at a store in the past 12 months, and 15 percent say they have used these codes to find information about a product's ingredients or nutrition information during the same period, the survey found.

Women and those who say they have scanned UPC or QR codes in the last year were more likely to say they would scan these codes to see if the product contains GM ingredients, Hallman said.

Likely effect of GM labeling on purchases

Nearly half of Americans say that they would be much less likely (31 percent) or somewhat less likely (18 percent) to purchase a food product if they learned that it contained genetically modified ingredients. About 4 in 10 (42 percent) say that it would make no difference in their

intentions to buy that product, and six percent say that learning that a food product is genetically modified would make them more likely to purchase it.

Those who say they are less likely to purchase foods if they contain GM ingredients also say they are more likely to scan UPC or QR codes to find out if products contain those ingredients. “Because of this, it is likely that some food manufacturers will eliminate GM ingredients from their products," Hallman said.

Americans likely underestimate how much GM food they eat

In the ASK survey, a third of Americans (34 percent) said that they had eaten some or a great deal of genetically modified food in the past week, a third (34 percent) said they had consumed not much or none at all, and a third (32 percent) said that they did not know. In fact, the USDA has said that in 2014, U.S. farmers planted genetically engineered (GE) crops in “over 90 percent of corn, soybean, cotton, canola, and sugar beet acreage,” producing ingredients common in processed foods.

“Without mandatory labeling, consumers are unlikely to recognize that many of the food products they buy have genetically modified components,” Hallman said. The survey found that 28 percent of respondents thought that the labeling of GM foods was already mandated by law while 54 percent were unsure whether such labeling is required. Only 18 percent knew that the labeling of genetically modified foods was not mandatory prior to passage of the new law.

Informed that Congress had recently passed a bill that would require the labeling of genetically modified foods, the majority of Americans (81 percent) said they approve of the requirement.

The phone survey, conducted for APPC by research firm SSRS, has a margin of error of ±3.7 percentage points. It is part of the Annenberg Public Policy Center’s ASK survey, which focuses on public knowledge about science, including GMOs and Zika virus. The ASK survey is directed by APPC director Kathleen Hall Jamieson and managed by APPC managing director of survey research Ken Winneg.

For more on the questions and data, see the Appendix. The policy center’s ASK surveys can be found here. Another recent ASK survey is Americans Support GMO Food Labels But Don’t Know Much About the Safety of GM Foods.

The Annenberg Public Policy Center was established in 1994 to educate the public and policy makers about the media’s role in advancing public understanding of political and health issues. APPC’s FactCheck.org is a nonpartisan consumer advocate for voters, and its SciCheck feature investigates false or misleading scientific claims made to influence public policy. Its latest post on GMOs is Do Processed Foods Contain GMOs?