

Process Labeling of Food: Consumer Behavior, the Agricultural Sector, and Policy Recommendations

The distance between the consumer and producer in today's global food system [poses obstacles](#) for effective communication and establishment of trust.

- Producers are aware of the quality of what they sell, whereas consumers generally are not.
- Consumers can find it difficult to align food choices with their individual preferences.

Under appropriate third-party or governmental [oversight](#):

- Process labels can effectively bridge the informational gap between producers and consumers,
- Satisfy consumer demand for broader and more stringent quality assurance criteria, and
- Create value for both consumers and producers.

Despite these potential benefits, process labeling often has serious unintentional [consequences](#):

- Increasing food prices
- Inducing unsubstantiated quality expectations for the newly labeled products
- Stunting scientific and technological advances in agriculture



The assumption that truthful labels will always benefit consumers can be [unrealistic](#) for several reasons.

- In some cases labels may confound or misguide consumers and are unlikely to lead to improvements to the food and agricultural markets.
- It is likely that process labels communicating the use of a specific technology—generally new and unknown to consumers—will induce an instinctive, negative reaction.

There are a [number of challenges](#) that arise with the consumer response to labels.

- A fundamental problem with process labels is that they are subject to consumers' interpretation.
- Consumers can be exposed to marketing messages that can be misleading.
- The inferential nature of process labels can cause increased search costs for consumers
- Process labels can be used by marketers to stigmatize rival conventionally produced products.

The authors suggest the following [policy recommendations](#) related to process labeling:

- Mandatory labeling should only occur in situations in which the product has been scientifically demonstrated to harm human health.
- Governments should avoid imposing bans on process labels.
- Some conditions need to be required to avoid causing false implications related to competing products.
 - The labeling claims must be true and scientifically verifiable.
 - Process labels claiming a product “contains” or is “free of” a certain production-related process should also include labels on the package stating the current scientific consensus regarding the importance of this attribute.

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