FOOD POLITICS

Is nanotechnology the new GMO?

Marion Nestle, December 13, 2011

Food Navigator reports that UK experts are demanding public debate and regulation of nanomaterials in foods. Without that, they warn, nanotechnology risks "facing the same fate as genetically modified (GM) foods in consumer perceptions."

Nanotechnology is about manipulating materials on the scale of atoms or molecules, measured in nanometers (nm), one billionth, or 10^{-9}, of a meter.

Many companies are already using nanomaterials in agriculture, food processing, food packaging, and supplements. This is not something the public has heard much about. Food companies often don't know whether or not they are using these materials.

Nanotechnology science is new, and the industry is unregulated.

The FDA's nanotechnology web page links to a quite thorough 2007 report from a task force, but the agency's only guidance to date tells companies how they can find out whether they are using nanomaterials.

Jumping into that gap, As You Sow has issued a *Sourcing Framework for Food and Food Packaging Products Containing Nanomaterials*.

As You Sow says:

> Not only is this technology unregulated and untested for its implications on public health but companies may not even be aware if they are using products made with nanomaterials….In consultation with food companies such as: Kraft, McDonald's (which has adopted a "no nano" policy), Whole Foods, Yum! Brands, and Pepsi, the nonprofit organization As You Sow developed this practical tool which clearly outlines what companies should ask their suppliers regarding the safety of products containing nanomaterials.

The report fills an important gap. Companies using this technology should be telling the public more about it. Nanotechnology is technical, difficult to grasp intuitively, "foreign," and not under personal control. This places it high on the scale of "dread-and-outrage."

Does it belong there? Who knows? But the sooner its risks and benefits are assessed, the better. Otherwise it risks becoming the next GMO in public perception.