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Safeway defending gene-altered ingredients

A spokeswoman says shareholders were backing such products during an annual meeting vote, while protesters point to dangers

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SAN RAMON -- Safeway shareholders appeared Tuesday to be defeating a resolution that would have directed the supermarket chain to remove genetically engineered ingredients from its products until long-term tests can determine whether they are safe.

Shareholders of the Pleasanton-based company voted on the resolution at the Marriott Hotel during their annual meeting. A final vote count won't be available until later in the week, said Debra Lambert, Safeway's corporate director of public affairs. However, she said with nearly all the votes counted, almost 98 percent voted against the resolution.

Meanwhile, outside the Marriott, more than a dozen people protested Safeway's use of genetically engineered products. They carried signs reading "No to Franken-Cow" and "Genetic Contamination is Forever."

The resolution was crafted by the As You Sow Foundation, Catholic Healthcare West and the Interfaith Center on Corporate Responsibility. Some members of those groups are Safeway shareholders.

"Safeway derives no financial benefit from using genetically engineered foods," said Michael Passoff of the As You Sow Foundation in a statement. "There is no consumer demand for these products and growing consumer backlash against them."

In a news release, Safeway stated, "we share and actively support our customers' interests in food safety ... As a retailer, however, we are neither qualified nor entitled to establish food safety regulations and labeling requirements."

The statement deferred to the federal Food and Drug Administration's practice of requiring labels if food is significantly changed from its traditional form, such as altering the nutritional content. Safeway also stated it "would have serious difficulty determining what constitutes genetically engineered crops, organisms or products thereof."

Protester Simon Harris, California field organizer for the Organic Consumers Association, said the FDA does not require tests on such products, and the only tests being done are by corporate scientists.

"I don't think the FDA is looking out for us," said Harris. "How can you promote and regulate something at the same time?"

Harris said he hopes the protesters convey the importance of testing genetically engineered foods to the shareholders. He said this is part of the organization's ongoing efforts to raise public awareness.

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