REMARKS OF

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PANEL ON "PUBLIC INFORMATION ISSUES"

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"BIOTECHNOLOGY IN THE YEAR 2000 AND BEYOND"

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Thank you, Commissioner Henney, for holding these important public meetings on this crucial topic. For too long, the American public has felt essentially shut out of decisions regarding how our society will reap the benefits, and protect ourselves from the risks, of agricultural biotechnology. I hope the openness evident here today, and at the Washington and Oakland meetings, is a sign of better things to come.

I also thank you for the invitation to present a consumer perspective on information and labeling issues. I'll get right to the point: I am here to urge the FDA, the biotechnology industry and anyone else who has not yet fully embraced the idea of labeling, to commit yourselves, sincerely and fast, to mandatory national labeling standards for genetically modified (GM) foods. Both U.S. products and imported GM foods should be clearly labeled.

The reason is simple self-interest. FDA, USDA and the industry may not believe as passionately as I do that consumers have a right to know what they are eating, and a right to choose what they eat. But we probably all can agree that if the public rejects biotechnology because of concern about the risks, we all could lose out on many of the benefits this revolution in biology hopes to deliver. Labeling is an absolutely essential foundation for public acceptance of genetically engineered foods. Here's why:

First, there are safety reasons. Although we hope it won't happen and we expect that if it does happen it will be rare, it's possible that some GM foods may contain either unknown allergens or other toxic agents that could cause adverse health effects in some consumers. Labeling the foods is important

for connecting cause and effect in such cases (i.e., it enables collection of sound scientific data on the problem). And it's critical for people who have had an adverse reaction, to help them avoid a repeat exposure.

Additional and vital reasons for labeling arise from the context in which consumers process information about GM foods. Consumers already know something about GM foods; they have varying types and amounts of facts, opinions and attitudes on the subject. A label on a product is not some dire warning, that overrides all other information. It's a fact, which a consumer plugs into whatever else she already knows and thinks about GM foods.

Information programs that attempt to convince consumers that science has proven GM foods safe won't work. In fact, that approach may make the public more skeptical, not less so. Such "risk communication" is arrogant and denies the legitimacy of concerns consumers have about this technology that go beyond science and safety. If you want respect for your science, you must show respect for consumers' values. Label the foods. Let people make their own choices, based on what is important to them.

The science of risk perception also teaches that people worry far less about risks they can voluntary accept or avoid. Labeling makes risks voluntary, and in a very real sense, can almost make worries vanish.

Mandatory national labeling standards are essential so that everyone has a choice—not just the wealthy elite who can afford to shop for organic foods. A uniform approach is fairest to producers and consumers alike—we'll all know what information to provide and what to look for.

My own organization, Consumers Union, and many others who I'm sure we'll hear from in a few minutes, have grown quite frustrated with the FDA's legalistic rationalizations about its supposed lack of authority to require labeling of GM foods. The FDA very clearly does have the legal authority to require labeling for informational, not safety reasons. This authority has been used to require labeling of irradiated foods, foods that were previously frozen, and juices made from concentrate, for example.

Commissioner, many of us believe the FDA's unwillingness to require labeling in this case is not based on the law, and it clearly is not based on an analysis of information consumers want and need. Recent opinion surveys show that 68 to 93 percent of the public supports the labeling of genetically

engineered foods. It appears to us as if the agency is simply giving in to demands from the biotechnology industry that FDA shield it from consumer preferences. I appeal to you to personally take charge of this policy and fix what looks "broken" to us.

Consumers, of course, want more than just labeling. We'd like FDA to be as certain as science can reasonably be that specific genetically engineered foods are safe, before they enter the market. We'd like to be equally sure those crops will not create long-term ecological damage, although we know that's not FDA's job. The need for rigorous safety assessment was the topic of the earlier session today, so I won't belabor this point.

In concluding, I'd like to stress that, as critical as science and safety are to consumers, those are not the make-or-break issues for biotechnology at this juncture. The future of biotechnology depends on ***trust***, and on ***choice***. If trust and choice are lacking, the best science in the world may not be good enough.

If the biotechnology industry wants consumers to trust its products, it must be willing to trust consumers. Don't tell us what we have to buy; respect our concerns, and let us make our own choices. If the FDA wants the public to trust its decisions, you must try even harder to demonstrate that you have the public's interests uppermost in your mind, and not concern for the welfare of the biotechnology industry.

Trust and choice. Labeling is the key to both. Label the foods.

Thank you, Commissioner. I look forward to hearing what the people in the audience have to say.