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Wednesday.

Jun. 13, 2013

A bill that would require food producers to label products containing genetically-engineered ingredients continued to march forward in the Legislature on Wednesday.

The Senate voted 35-0 Wednesday to pass an amended version of the bill, L.D. 718, mirroring a similarly overwhelming vote in the House the day before. Supporters of the bill, including the Maine Organic Farmers & Gardeners Association, are hopeful a compromise provision that triggers the labeling requirement once five contiguous states, including Maine, adopt labeling laws will also win the support of Gov. Paul LePage.

The governor has not taken a position on the bill, but even if the bill becomes law the labeling requirement will hinge on the actions of state lawmakers in New Hampshire, the only state with which Maine shares a border.

A GMO-labeling bill has been submitted to the New Hampshire Legislature. The public hearing was over five hours long, according to N.H. state Rep. Tara Sad, D-Walpole, the chairwoman of the Environment and Agriculture Committee, the panel working the proposal.

Like Maine, the labeling bill in the Granite State is the result of a growing and well-organized popular organic food movement that is determined to take on the biotech industry and Monsanto, the agribusiness and biotech industry giant, following unsuccessful effort to do so in Congress.

Monsanto has threatened to sue states that pass similar labeling laws, which is one reason why lawmakers in several states are passing labeling legislation dependent on

other states doing the same. The state compacts could help defray costs of a lawsuit.

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H.B. 710 is not Maine's first GMO labeling bill, nor is H.B. 660 the first to appear before the New Hampshire Legislature. Sad, who has been in the New Hampshire Legislature for seven years, said the recent proposal was the fourth that she's seen.

Sad acknowledged that there was more momentum behind the latest effort. Nonetheless, she said Granite State lawmakers were proceeding cautiously.

She said lawmakers were sensitive to threat of a lawsuit and had waited to see how other states had proceeded.

"We're a poor state," Sad said. "We have no tax, we have no sales tax, we have no income tax. The idea that we would be risky a very costly lawsuit because of a bill that we filed is very scary, although that's not justification enough to not pass a bill that's good."

She said that her committee would hold work additional sessions on H.B. 660 beginning in August. The bill must be reported out of committee by Nov. 22. The earliest the bill could be enacted is in 2014.

Proponents of the bill, including the Maine Organic Farmers & Gardeners Association, said it is up to states to take on industry to ensure that it discloses whether food is bio-engineered — its DNA has been spliced with that of an unrelated plant, animal, bacterium or virus — because Congress has failed to enact federal legislation.

Opponents, including the Maine State Chamber of Commerce, the Maine Farm Bureau and the Grocery Manufacturers Association say the bill would unfairly stigmatize genetically modified foods despite a dearth of scientific research proving that such products are any less healthful than those that are conventionally grown.

Maine law now allows retailers to voluntarily label products as certified organic,

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Supporters of labeling argue that independent testing of genetically modified foods hasn't happened because industry patents prohibit it.

The federal Food and Drug Administration regulates genetically modified foods but does not approve them. The agency assumes that the foods are safe until confronted with evidence that they're not.

The Maine Legislature has rejected four previous GMO-labeling bills. L.D. 718 requires additional votes before hitting LePage's desk

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