

majority leader refused to allow him to bring it up. He rejected the unanimous consent request that would allow the amendment of my colleague who is sitting in the chair to be considered.

We agreed that the amendment of my colleague from Kentucky, Senator PAUL, could be considered. His amendment seeks to clarify and make sure that there are no criminal penalties in this labeling law. Well, I would be happy to vote for that amendment, because there are no criminal penalties and there shouldn't be any, and if we want to put an exclamation point behind that through this particular amendment from my colleague, I would be fine with that. If he were allowed to bring up that amendment, maybe he would show some other aspects of it on the floor—some other ways that reverberate and some other ways that I don't actually recognize when I read his amendment.

But he can't fill us in on the details of what his amendment would do because he is not allowed to bring it up. Even though he is a Republican, he is not allowed to bring it up, even though the Chamber is governed by a Republican majority. His own leader refuses to allow him to have his amendment brought up and debated. In fact, we agreed for another Republican amendment, the Murkowski amendment, on the labeling of genetically engineered salmon to be brought up and debated—an issue we have wrestled with here before. We have probably all heard most of the pros and cons. But perhaps in the formulation of this amendment, there are some new aspects that would have been brought to bear that would have influenced us to support it or to oppose it.

But this Republican amendment can't be brought up because the Republican leader rejected a unanimous consent request that would have allowed all of these amendments to be brought up. In fact, there were only three Republican amendments, and we agreed to hear all of them and, in exchange, we asked for three Democratic amendments.

I see that my colleague Senator BLUMENTHAL has arrived to speak. I think I will come back and explain what those Democratic amendments were a bit from now.

Mr. President, I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Connecticut.

SHOOTINGS IN LOUISIANA AND MINNESOTA

Mr. BLUMENTHAL. Mr. President, I thank my colleague, Senator MERKLEY, for his very powerful arguments for improving this law. I wish to speak about the GMO labeling act. But before I do so, I wish to speak separately about concerns that are on the hearts and minds of every American today after the shootings that we have seen in Louisiana and Minnesota. These are incidents that weigh on our hearts and our minds as we watched—literally watched—the videos that have been played again and again and again on TV around the Nation.

I echo President Obama's eloquently expressed concerns shared by many Americans after the recent tragic shootings in Louisiana and Minnesota. My heart breaks for the families and communities. I agree with President Obama that acknowledging we must do better in no way contradicts our respect for law enforcement.

As a former prosecutor, a U.S. attorney, and attorney general of my State for 20 years, I worked with law enforcement officials closely for more than two decades. I worked with them with great admiration for their courage and professionalism. I understand and appreciate the challenges they face every day, their selflessness in the line of duty, and their commitment to keeping our communities safe, often at great sacrifice to themselves.

Tragedies like the deaths of Philando Castile and Alton Sterling threaten to undermine trust and understanding between law enforcement and the communities they serve. That is why I fought to pass the Death in Custody Reporting Act—bipartisan legislation which requires States to report to the U.S. Department of Justice information regarding individuals who die every year while in police custody or during the course of an arrest. I have also supported funding to help local law enforcement agencies cooperate and collaborate more closely with communities and build trust by purchasing and using body-worn cameras, which have been shown to reduce citizen complaints by as much as 88 percent.

We have much more to do in effectively assuring justice for communities of color. We must have an honest conversation about the role of race in society, not just in the disparities in the criminal justice system but in our economy, our media, and our communities. Words alone are insufficient. We must act. I will continue to work with my colleagues in Washington, across the country, and Connecticut to bring Americans together and make our society more just for all.

As a separate part of the record, if there is no objection, Mr. President, I would like to continue our discussion about the GMO labeling bill. I regret very sincerely the absence of an opportunity to offer these amendments that might improve this bill and enable us to provide the American people with what they need and deserve—the best possible legislative product this body can provide, a legislative product that matches the desires of 90 percent of Americans to know more about what they are eating, the 15,000 Connecticut people who have corresponded with me, and the many individuals, activists, and advocates who tell me they believe they have a right to know what is in their food when it comes to GMOs.

The science is beyond my advocacy, but the consumer protection issue is one all of us are experts on. We all know we need better and more information, and so to make access to that information more difficult and cum-

bersome and even costly for Americans flies in the face of what we regard as free and open and fair markets and free enterprise. It is more than just about the doctrines of deceptive and misleading marketing which the good guys in the world of business certainly want to avoid. It is about providing more information, as much accurate information as possible, because consumers have a right and a need to know. Throwing roadblocks in the way of that right doesn't do justice for them. They deserve better.

So I will continue this fight. We are near an hour now where we will vote. I greatly respect the dedication of my colleagues who have worked hard on this measure. My very distinguished and able friend from Michigan Senator STABENOW is now with us. She and I are in agreement, my guess is, 99 percent of the time, and I respect as well our colleague Senator ROBERTS, chairman of the Agriculture Committee, but the issue here is supremely important to the health and well-being of Americans—not just today, not just children and families at this moment but for years and decades to come. While the science may be debated, the consumer protection issue is beyond doubt. Let's open information to the American consumers, make it more available, not less so; remove the obstacles, not create more hurdles; reduce the costs, not raise the expense; and provide the access that Americans need to full and fair information about GMOs that may be in their food.

Thank you, Mr. President, and I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Michigan.

Ms. STABENOW. Thank you, Mr. President.

I couldn't agree more with my friend from Connecticut. I think probably 99 percent of the time we are voting the same way. There are good people on both sides of this discussion. There is a lot of emotion, and I think this issue around information and GMO labeling is really a proxy fight in many ways for those who support biotechnology, those who don't, and those who want to debate pesticides and other important issues that don't relate to labeling but have come into this situation.

I think what we need to focus on is the fact that, A, people have a right to know information, how do we make sure it is done effectively, and at the same time we certainly don't want costs to be going up as was indicated. I know if we have 50 different labeling laws in 50 different States, that means the cost of putting those labels on and manufacturing and to grocers and so on, it is going to go up and not down, which is why there was great concern in the House when the bill was passed there a year ago.

So the question for us is, How do we make sure costs don't go up? How do we ensure we have a right to know? And how do we make sure we believe in the science and respect the science?

The FDA has said very clearly, in rejecting petitions to label under human health and safety laws, petition after petition, they have said the science does not show risk to human health.

So looking at the National Academy of Sciences and the FDA and others, both world medical groups as well as those in this country, it is clear this is not a health and safety issue, but it is an information issue, and I believe it needs to be addressed, which is why the FDA, which handles the information and marketing, is the place where this belongs because the FDA does not believe it is in their jurisdiction related to science around food safety.

So we know if we go back a moment—let me just say, before talking about labeling, I believe in supporting all sorts of agriculture. When I chaired the Agriculture Committee and we started working on the 5-year farm bill a number of years ago—it is hard to believe we are halfway through it right now—but I said it was very important that we support all parts of agriculture and not pit one group against the other, which is one of my concerns right now in this whole debate, pitting one side against the other, because we didn't do that in the farm bill. We created great increases in organic research, organic checkoff and marketing as well as traditional production agriculture. We did some very exciting creative things for local food hubs and urban agriculture that had not been done before. We said we were going to support all of agriculture.

I believe, from a consumer standpoint, if we give choices, then consumers will decide. We know also that the fastest growing sector of the food sector is organic, which is non-GMO, by the way, and one of the things we do is strengthen that label and make it clear for the public to know they are purchasing organic and a non-GMO product.

We came out of the farm bill with all parts of agriculture working together and we won a good farm bill. I think probably one of, if not the most, progressive farm bills we have had, supporting all parts of agriculture because we weren't pitting one group against the other, which, unfortunately, that is what this debate has become right now.

When the House almost exactly a year ago passed a bill to preempt States—I know Vermont passed a State law. When the House voted to indicate there shouldn't be 50 different States with 50 different labeling laws and passed a preemption, they included only voluntary labeling, and consumers called that the DARK Act because it wasn't a required mandatory labeling of information and transparency. So the House bill, with the voluntary process, came here and I opposed it. I opposed it at every turn and indicated we had to have a mandatory system of information and of labeling for consumers that should be done in a way that does not stigmatize biotechnology, and it should be done in a

way that does not set up more costs for consumers by 50 different States with different labeling laws adding costs for grocery manufacturers and grocers and so on, which is what would happen if we had 50 different laws.

I went through this at one time back years ago when we were debating fuel economy standards when California passed its own fuel economy standard for automobiles. As other States looked at that, they were trying to push the Federal Government—rightly so—and the industry said: We can't have 50 different standards for fuel economy. So we said: OK. You are right, but that means you have to have a national standard on fuel economy, and that is where we ended up.

So the people of Vermont, first of all, should feel very good that what they have done has created this situation to get us to a national labeling program, but here's what happens if we do nothing right now. We have a couple of choices. One is that Vermont has a GMO label. We have two other States that are waiting to see if States around them pass labeling laws that at some point may come into this, but that is basically who is getting information. We talked about everyone should have information. Right there. Those are the folks who have labeling laws.

There were attempts on the west coast to pass labeling laws, and those were not successful so this is what we have.

Now what we are proposing is that everybody will have information, people in my home State of Michigan, people across the country, everybody will get information and there will have to be a mandatory label. We give three choices on food that contain GMOs, not voluntary but a mandatory labeling system. So what do we do and how is it different than what happened in the House?

Well, first of all, as I have indicated, a national mandatory labeling requirement, and I will talk more about that in a moment.

Secondly, in Vermont and at the State level, meat, eggs, cheese, and dairy are exempt—totally exempt. So someone called it the Vermont meat loophole. So we said: You know what. That is not acceptable. So we added 25,000 more food products under this law that we would be voting on tonight. On this bill, 25,000 more food products will be labeled for people to know whether they are getting GMO ingredients.

Next, the organic label. I have to say the organic trade organization was extremely effective in the efforts in passing the farm bill. They came to me with four different items they were interested in including. It was tough to get all four of those. I didn't think we actually could get them in negotiations. After our tough negotiations, I appreciate that we actually were able to achieve all four requests of the Organic Trade Association.

Even though they would prefer to have one kind of label, like Vermont,

they understand this was a very big step forward for the organic community. It was a step forward to get mandatory requirement and accountability. And I very much respect and appreciate the fact that when they were able to achieve all four items they felt were critical for organic farmers, they indicated they were very supportive of that and what we are doing here.

Then we made sure that State and Federal consumer laws were protected, so that the label is preempted, having a label, but enforcing penalties if there is fraud or misinformation or something else related to the label—those enforcement mechanisms are maintained. So that is where the enforcement comes from.

The only way we are like the House is that we prevent a patchwork of 50 different labeling laws. But everything else we have done builds on and strengthens the public's right to know as it relates to GMO ingredients.

One of the big debates: OK, there are three different options. Vermont has words on the package, and we have some companies now that are doing that. They are going to indicate—regardless of what we do, they want the definition settled and they want a national policy, but based on consumer demand, they are going to proceed to have words on the package. I believe we will see more and more of that happening in the marketplace, companies responding to consumer demand.

The other option we give is a label, an on-pack symbol. We don't specifically say "GMO" in a circle, but something like that.

The third option we give is an electronic label. Some people say QR code, which actually came from the auto industry and stands for quick response code—when they were tracking labels and checking parts and other parts of the system, which actually has worked very well. But the fact is that some kind of electronic label—and technology is changing every day. Apps are changing every day. So there will probably be other options that are talked about other than a QR code.

But the reality is, just as a number of groups right now that care about food and the environment have their own apps that give consumers information, this is the other option. You would be able to take your phone—by the way, according to Nielsen, 82 percent of the public has a smartphone—82 percent, not 10 percent—and we are expecting that to be more like 90 percent very shortly. You are able to scan, and immediately it will come up on the front—immediately, not hidden somewhere, not two or three clicks to get there, but you will immediately get information, yes or no, on whether there are GMOs. In fact, when you see whatever the code is, you are probably going to have a pretty good hint by that as well.

So why do that? Well, some in the food industry would say there is a desire to make sure that when people are

given information about genetically engineered or genetically modified foods, that they actually get information such as “The National Academy of Sciences says this is safe for human consumption.” That is the reason.

I think there is another reason for this, and the reason it has been suggested in other forms is so that people really do get more information about their food. The reality is that the No. 1 question people ask is about food allergies. It is very difficult to find that out right now. Going forward, I think we can create an effective, user-friendly electronic label that will give people “yes” or “no” on not just GMOs but on food allergies.

The next question was about antibiotics in meat. There are multiple questions people have that need to be answered, not just one. There are multiple things people are interested in.

Despite the emotions around this debate, I think probably in the future we are going to see effective uses of our technology to give us more information in a user-friendly way.

The other thing we do is say that the USDA has to review accessibility of broadband, accessibility of the technology before this starts, that they have to do that right away. They are required to and are given the authority to be able to put additional scanners in stores, so that if somebody doesn't have a phone, they can take the can, put it up to the scanner, and it will give them information about food allergies or GMOs or whatever. The first thing that comes up has to be GMOs.

The USDA is required to look at accessibility because there are legitimate issues around accessibility that need to be addressed, and that is one of the things they are given the authority to address, and we need to make sure that continues to be addressed.

But the final thing I will say about this is that companies, consumers, stores, grocery stores will drive this. Once we say this is it—we have companies right now saying: Great. Three options. We are doing this one because that is what our customers want.

We have stores, great stores like Whole Foods, that say: You know what, you can have three options, but we are only going to allow an on-pack symbol or words in our store.

That is going to drive the marketplace. The marketplace is going to be driven by those who are involved—by consumers, by the companies, by others who make sure they are giving people the information the way they want it.

Let me say just a couple of other things. I mentioned 25,000 additional food products in the stores. Anything that is a GMO product, package, frozen, that includes some meat in it—we are going to be adding to the information consumers will have access to. I will give an example. Right now, fettuccine Alfredo is labeled in Vermont, but if you put chicken in it, it is not labeled. To go on, if you have

a vegetable soup, it is labeled, but if it is beef vegetable soup, it is not. If there is even beef broth in it, it is not. I don't know how that makes sense, and yet that is the law under Vermont. I think people should be asking for more than what is going on in Vermont. Cheese pizza is labeled in Vermont, but if you put pepperoni on it, it is not, even though it still has GMO ingredients. So 25,000 additional products will be labeled because people have a right to know.

Let me finally indicate again that we have strengthened the “USDA Organic” label. This is no small thing. This is very important. The public needs to know, has the right to know, that USDA Organic also means non-GMO and that that is a choice you have right now, to be able to make sure you are getting the products that have the kinds of ingredients you want.

Again, I appreciate the emotionalism. In all honesty, I have to say this debate has gone in a lot of directions. A lot of things have been said that I certainly don't agree with. I question a lot of the things that have been said in terms of a factual nature. I also think we have gone into a lot of other tangents on things, debating other kinds of things and using the debate about the label as a proxy for a broader debate about biotechnology in the public. I appreciate and I respect that debate. Even though I disagree with things that are said, I respect that; that is why we are here.

I also will say in conclusion that we have a responsibility to govern, and governing means that you have to come together and work together. If we are going to get things done, it has to be bipartisan, or it doesn't get done. That is just a fact.

So if we are going to do something that is meaningful, that makes sure all of the country has the opportunity to have information and a national standard and the maximum amount of products labeled and that will protect the organic label in all of the country—by the way, the organic protections we have are not in the Vermont law. So if we are going to make sure all the provisions I talked about are not just available in some places but everywhere, that means we have to come together and work together. That means rough-and-tumble negotiations, tough negotiations. These are some of the toughest negotiations I have ever been in, and we have to be willing to have some give-and-take.

In the climate we are in today, I know it is a lot easier to go to your corner and point fingers at the other side and to develop conspiracy theories and to create situations and say things that, frankly, are extremely disparaging about people's motives and so on, and that is unfortunate. But we also know that we are people of good will; that is why we get things done. We may disagree on this one particular issue, but we are a group who gets things done when we work together,

when we respect all opinions, when we fight as hard as we can to get as much as we can for what we believe in and then stand together to be able to move forward.

Debating is great. It is not enough. People expect us to actually get things done. And contrary to what was done in the House, we have a mandatory national labeling system with 25,000 additional products than what is currently being labeled in Vermont or proposed in other States. We strengthen the organic label. We protect consumer laws to be able to enforce when there is fraud or there are other mislabeling issues. And at the same time, we make sure that citizens across the country, not just in one part of the country, are getting their right to know in a way that provides accurate information.

I thank everyone. I thank my partner, Senator ROBERTS. I appreciate the debate on all sides. I hope we are going to be coming to a conclusion shortly so that we can move on and actually implement and share information for consumers about how to access very important information not only about GMO ingredients and labeling, but I believe there are other important pieces of information for consumers to have as well. I think we should be looking for ways to make sure consumers get all of the kinds of information they are interested in as it relates to their food.

Thanks again for everyone's hard work and patience this evening as we have held everyone later this evening.

I would finally say one thing, if I might, and that is that I have worked in the last 24 hours to do everything I can to help my friends on the other side of this issue be able to get the votes they are interested in as it relates to amendments. Unfortunately, there was not agreement on how to do that. There was an offering two different times on amendments, to have an amendment vote on an important amendment, and folks opposed to the bill did not feel they wanted to do that, that that was enough. I respect that, but we now are at a point where we really need to come to a close and move forward on this important bill.

I yield the floor.

THE PRESIDING OFFICER. The majority leader.

DEFENSE APPROPRIATIONS BILL

MR. MCCONNELL. Mr. President, this evening, both sides will have an opportunity to take the next step and begin debate on the fiscal year 2017 Defense appropriations bill.

President Obama's announcement yesterday about our troops in Afghanistan only underscores the Senate's need to take up and pass the Defense appropriations bill right now. Although I support a high level of force to train and equip the Afghan forces and conduct counterterrorism operations, the President's announcement reminds us of the need for this bill.

The President made a commitment to our allies, and Senate Democrats