

THE ORGANIC & NON-GMO REPORT

Information to help you capitalize on markets for organic and non-genetically modified products

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Michael Funk: "Time has come" for The Non-GMO Project

Michael Funk is president and chief executive officer of United Natural Foods, Inc. (UNFI), the largest distributor of natural and organic foods in the United States with sales of nearly three billion dollars per year. Funk is also a board member of The Non-GMO Project, an initiative to encourage natural and organic food manufacturers to verify their products as non-GMO. *The Organic & Non-GMO Report* recently interviewed Funk about his company's involvement in the project and the project's goals.

How did United Natural Foods get involved in The Non-GMO Project?

Last fall, natural food retailers contacted us and asked us about the ability to identify products that are non-GMO. There was a gap in the verification process in that there was no consistent testing or definitions to verify non-GMO claims.

This is also an issue I've been passionate about. The biotechnology companies created this problem, and we're paying for it. It's unjust. We have to go through significant expense to deal with this problem.

The Non-GMO Project was originally a retailer ini-

tiative, but we asked that it be industry-wide, including farmers, processors, manufacturers, distributors, and retailers.

We want to help farmers and suppliers avoid buying GMO contaminated products.

The goal is non-GMO verification to meet consumers' needs, and we want 2007 to be a year of solid action to make progress on this issue.

Why is The Non-GMO Project needed in the natural and organic food industries?

There is no greater threat to the industry than GMOs. They don't belong in the



Michael Funk, president and CEO, United Natural Foods, Inc.

organic food supply. They threaten human health and the environment. There is no scientific data proving that genetically engineered foods are safe. In fact, research is starting to show negative health and environmental impacts.

There is also no government or industry regulation that defines or verifies GMOs in the food supply.

What will be United Natural Foods' role in The Non-GMO Project?

We will be putting our own products through the process to verify that they are non-GMO. We will also encourage vendors and food manufacturers whose products we distribute to verify their products as non-GMO. I will

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THE NON-GMO PROJECT NEWS

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also serve on the board of The Non-GMO Project, and UNFI will contribute to get the project started.

What has been the response from the natural and organic food industry to The Non-GMO Project?

Most people that we have talked to are supportive. There is some disagreement on how this effort needs to be managed, but there is an overall agreement on the need to eliminate GMOs from the food supply. With this agreement, we have a solid basis to go forward.

There seems to be some lack of concern or ignorance about the genetically engineered food issue in the natural and organic food industries. Do you think The Non-GMO Project will raise awareness of the issue?

Many people in the natural food industry had their heads in the sand about the genetically engineered food issue. Many people had taken a “don’t ask, don’t tell” attitude. In many ways, it is ignorance and a lack of understanding about a complex issue.

There is a lot of information to grasp, such as how GMOs are created, how they interact with the food supply, and how they cross-pollinate

with other crops. It has been a little too complicated for a lot of industry people, as well as consumers.

Certainly raising awareness and providing education will be important benefits of the project. People need a lot of information to make informed decisions.

At what stage is The Non-GMO Project now?

We just launched the first stage of the project at Natural Products Expo in Anaheim (in March). We just completed selection of board members, and now we’re meeting to set standards and protocols that hopefully can be adopted later this year.

We are also conducting trial testing of certain products. Strauss Family Creamery and other manufacturers are participating in trials. Our organic baby food lines will be going through verification. We will learn from these trials.

We need a non-GMO verification process that is consistent throughout the industry and can be scaleable, meaning that whatever systems we develop have to work on a large-scale basis in order to verify the thousands of products in the industry.

We also want to make sure the costs for verification are reasonable for companies.

What is the significance of having Whole Foods Market support The Non-GMO Project?

Having the largest organic retailer on the planet involved provides a huge amount of support and sends a strong message to the rest of the industry that this is a very important issue.

Whole Foods and UNFI will take a leadership role and encourage other natural and organic food companies to follow.

Will companies whose products are non-GMO verified be able to label their products as non-GMO?

That will be an option. Companies could use The Non-GMO Project’s logo. Other companies may use “non-GMO verified.” This is a question that is still being discussed.

What kind of impact do you think The Non-GMO Project will have?

We hope that ultimately it will lead to an effort to eliminate GMOs from the food supply in the organic sector and then the conventional food industry as well.

The time has come, and we now have the momentum to keep this project moving forward. ■