WASHINGTON STATE
Academy of Sciences
Science in the Service of Washington State

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# FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

## The Washington State Academy of Sciences provides evidence base for key questions related to I-522.

OLYMPIA -- A new report by the Washington State Academy of Sciences (WSAS) provides a science-based evaluation of the implications of passage of I-522. Commissioned by key legislative committees in the state Senate and House, the "white paper" addresses five specific questions related to the definition of genetically modified (GM) plants and animals, evidence for differences in safety and nutrient value, and implications of passage on the consumer, producers and trade within Washington, and state government. Co-chairs and WSAS members Eugene Nester and Thomas Marsh emphasized that "neither the committee nor the Academy itself advocate or recommend approval or rejection of I-522 but rather seeks to provide an unbiased evidence base related to the Initiative".

Foods from GM crops are "substantially equivalent" in nutritional value as compared to non-GM crops based on established analytic standards. Exceptions include "golden rice", engineered to produce higher levels of beta-carotene to combat vitamin A deficiency in children in certain parts of the world. While there are no significant, repeatable studies that demonstrate any adverse effect on health due to approved and marketed foods with GM ingredients, the challenge of "proving safety" as opposed to evidence of the lack of adverse effects was acknowledged by the committee. Continuous monitoring of food safety, consistent with national approaches, was recommended as a basic requirement for both foods with and without GM-based ingredients.

The committee noted that, at present, roughly 70% of the processed foods in U.S. supermarkets contain GM ingredients, primarily due to the high percentage of foods that contain ingredients from soybean and corn, which are overwhelming, >90%, GM in the U.S. As a result, the primary economic issues associated with mandatory labeling are due to trade effects. These effects are likely exacerbated when regulations differ among states and between countries.

The costs associated with mandatory labeling and compliance are highly likely to be borne both privately and publicly, reflecting both increased costs passed on by the food industry and the costs of government agency regulation. "The greatest costs are not in the labeling itself", clarified Marsh, "but in the segregation and demonstration of GM-free status, costs that would affect the price of both GM and non-GM containing foods". However the estimates of the costs vary widely, reflecting the lack of "after the fact" data that would be available if a single state were to require mandatory labeling. The degree of regulatory oversight, required laboratory analyses, and level of litigation would each impact the costs but are either imprecise or unknown. Better understanding of these costs would provide valuable information to the voter as each individual weighs the benefits of required labeling versus costs.

The full committee report is on the Washington State Academy of Sciences website at http://www.washacad.org

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