Largely lost in the shuffle of the current presidential election campaign and several more heavily-publicized state ballot measures, California's Secretary of State recently announced that the "California Right to Know Genetically Engineered Food Act" has qualified for the state's November 2012 election ballot, where it will appear as Proposition 37. (The text of Proposition 37 can be found at pages 110-113 of the preliminary November 2012 California Voter's Pamphlet; the official title and summary of the measure, in addition to arguments pro and con, here.)

As state initiative measures go, Proposition 37 is both short and simple: if enacted, it would generally require that, beginning in July 2014, any food offered for retail sale in California that has been produced all or in part via genetic engineering contain a "clear and conspicuous" label to that effect. Any genetically modified food lacking such a label would be considered "misbranded" under California law. Citizens suits are authorized to seek injunctive relief–but not fines or money damages–to enforce Proposition 37 in face of violations.

That's pretty much it.

If this sounds vaguely familiar, it should: Proposition 37 is roughly patterned on California's Safe Drinking Water and Toxic Enforcement Act, better known as Proposition 65. The latter initiative measure, enacted by California voters in 1986, requires manufacturers and sellers of products containing carcinogens or reproductive toxins to contain a similar, clear and conspicuous label so informing consumers.

The San Francisco Chronicle reports that at least 18 states, including California, have attempted without success to enact such labeling laws for genetically engineered foods in the past. Proposition 37 represents the first time, however, that the proposal will be decided directly by a state's voters. (By contrast, most other industrialized nations already require bio-engineered foods to be labeled.)

The political and economic stakes are substantial. It's estimated that between 70-80% of processed foods sold in the United States are made with genetically engineered ingredients. And a growing percentage of America's raw foods such as fruits and vegetables are bio-engineered as well.

Deep-pocketed opponents of Proposition 37, including food manufacturers such as PepsiCo and Coca-Cola along with the biotech industry and seed companies, have created a political war chest of over $25 million to defeat the measure. That's more

than 10 times the funds Proposition 37's backers–primarily food activists and natural food companies–have raised.

Proposition 37 opponents claim that bio-engineered crops and processed foods are safe, and that the costs of labeling would be substantial and eventually passed on to consumers in the form of higher prices. But the latter argument seems frivolous, and the former misses the point. As backers of Proposition 37 point out, the measure doesn't ban genetically modified foods; it simply alerts consumers and allows those who want to avoid bio-engineered foods to do so.

To be sure, over the past 26 years many manufacturers of consumer products have chosen to comply with Proposition 65 by reformulating their products, rather than having to label them with notices indicating that they could cause cancer or birth defects. It's certainly possible that, armed with the ability to pick and choose between genetically modified and natural food products, many California consumers would select the latter. And that, in turn, could eventually incentivize farmers and food manufacturers to think twice about their growing reliance on bioengineering.

Is that such a bad thing?

In sum, Proposition 37 represents a modest but positive step towards informed consumers and customer choice. What is the food industry so afraid of? And why are they intent on spending so much money to prevent Californians from having relevant information allowing them to make informed choices with respect to the foods they consume?