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Can the Senate pass a GMO law by year's end?

By Jenny Hopkinson
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Sen. Debbie Stabenow wants to see the Senate pass a GMO labeling bill by the end of the year, but there are a lot of questions that have to be answered before that can happen. Top of the list: What will that bill will look like? The Michigan Democrat and ranking member of the Senate Agriculture Committee used Wednesday's hearing on biotechnology to call for legislation that must prevent the creation of a patchwork of state laws and inform consumers without stigmatizing the science. But that could arguably be applied to the industry-backed bill from Rep. Mike Pompeo, or, depending on whom you talk to, the mandatory labeling bill from Sen. Barbara Boxer. Stabenow told reporters she doesn't back Pompeo's Safe and Accurate Food Labeling Act, but she isn't signed on to Boxer's Genetically Engineered Food Right-to-Know Act either. And she is offering very few details on what appropriate legislation would look like, leaving groups following the issue scratching their heads over what exactly the senator wants to see. While Stabenow is in talks with Senate Agriculture Committee Chairman Pat Roberts and Sen. John Hoeven, who has been working on an industry-backed bill, she said nothing has been written yet.

The other problem: The end of the year isn't that far away, and there is already plenty on the Senate's plate for the roughly dozen weeks before 2016. Stabenow said that "there is a lot of interest on both sides, so we are working on how we address very legitimate concerns -- obviously 50 states with 50 different ways of labeling doesn't work, but at the same time consumers have a right to know."

Also on the Senate's to-do list is reauthorizing the Healthy Hunger-Free Kids Act, which expired Sept. 30, though programs continue. Stabenow said there was "a lot of positive discussion" but

otherwise just "short steps" on the bill. She wouldn't offer her thoughts on whether reauthorization or GMO labeling will be first across the line.