

County to vote on GMOs

By Jason Walsh INDEX-TRIBUNE NEWS EDITOR

10.07.05 - Are they agricultural versions of Frankenstein's monsters or helpful little gremlins that can help put food on the table?

This isn't a Halloween question. It's the center of the Measure M debate over genetically modified organisms (GMOs), which Sonoma County voters will be asked to weigh in on at the Nov. 8 special election. The measure requires a simple majority to pass.

The proposed initiative places a 10-year county-wide ban on the growth of "genetically modified" organisms - those whose DNA has been modified through gene manipulation - and it has divided the Sonoma County farming community, largely along organic and nonorganic lines.

Thus far, aside from a small level of

genetically engineered cornfields, Sonoma County has remained GMO free. In fact, only four genetically engineered crops have been commercialized nationwide on a large scale - soy, cotton, canola and corn.

But Measure M proponents expect many fruits, vegetables and other crops to become more widely genetically engineered in the coming years, and they want to take precautions to prevent GMOs spreading to Sonoma County until the promoters of the technology can offer proof of its safety.

The ban would include growth of any genetically modified food, animal, fish or crop - though the sale, purchase or distribution of items that already have genetically modified ingredients would be exempt from the ban.

The [text](#) of Measure M offers multiple concerns about the use of GMOs, but, according to its primary author, Dave Henson, a lack of federal research into GMO safety and the probability that genetic modification will result in negative repercussions for farms not using GMOs are the primary causes for alarm.

"No one has done the research into what are the downstream consequences of releasing these genetically engineered crops," said Henson, the executive director of the Occidental Arts and Ecology Center.

At the root of Henson's argument is the idea of "contamination" - that by their very nature, GMOs from one farm will eventually contaminate the crops on nearby farms which aren't using GMOs.

This contamination, according to the measure's [text](#), occurs inevitably from seeds brought by winds, insects, birds, animals, water, trucks or farm machinery.

Henson said the issue of contamination is largely to do with the development of "super weeds" and "super bugs." As genetically engineered crops are developed to resist herbicides and pesticides, those very weeds and insects targeted by such chemicals will rapidly develop similar chemical resistances as that of the crops.

This will not only result in GMO-free farms being contaminated with GMO-crop seeds, but also with

spray-resistant weeds and pests - forcing farmers to use far more toxic chemicals to combat them.

But opponents of the measure say any ban on GMOs will have a "crippling" economic effect on Sonoma County agriculture, placing farmers at a competitive disadvantage with those from counties that allow GMOs.

"To us it's about choice," said Lex McCorvey, executive director of the Sonoma County Farm Bureau, which opposes the measure. "For those who want to grow, promote or sell organic products, that's wonderful - we totally support and endorse that. But for those who choose not (to be organic) we think they should have a chance to use the technology that is available."

Additionally, Measure M opponents cite the cost of enforcing a ban, its ambiguous language, and the initiative's lack of an exemption for genetically engineered medical or veterinary vaccines as reasons voters should reject the proposal.

Sonoma Valley dairy farmer Mitch Mulas opposes the initiative, but sympathizes with the concerns that GMOs will result in stronger weeds and pests.

"That part is true," said Mulas. "There will always be an increased resistance whenever you (modify) a crop."

But Mulas said it's important agriculture keep pace with technology if only so that it can continue to sufficiently supply a growing population.

"Organic farms have got their little niche and you've got to give them credit for that, but they simply don't produce enough to sustain the general population," Mulas said. "Genetically modified foods are going to be needed 50 years from now just to sustain the food supply."

For more information on Measure M, visit www.sonoma-county.org/vote.