

## **WINE COUNTRY DIVIDED - The GMO duel**

**NOV. 8 BALLOT: Wine industry split over proposed ban on engineered crops**

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Glen Ellen vintner Mike Benziger wants a temporary ban on genetically engineered crops in Sonoma County, calling Measure M's proposed 10-year moratorium a needed "timeout" to catch up with the science.

Across the county, Graton grape grower Steve Dutton, a fifth-generation Sonoma County farmer, strongly opposes the ban, saying it would stifle technology that could lead to disease-resistant grapevines and reduce the use of pesticides.

Dutton and Benziger, both leaders in Sonoma County's \$2 billion wine industry, represent the escalating debate over Measure M that will ask voters to choose between environmental sanctity and scientific innovation on the Nov. 8 ballot.

Winemakers and growers, who nurture the image of wine as a special combination of grape and nature, are as divided as they ever have been over an agricultural issue. The symbolic significance is whether Sonoma County will be seen as embracing or rejecting a technology that could alter not only the genetic makeup of grapevines in decades to come, but also the public's perception of future vintages.

Mendocino County voters two years ago approved an anti-GMO measure despite record-setting spending by agribusiness companies opposed to the measure.

Now Sonoma County, in what could be the most expensive ballot campaign in its history, is poised to make a statement that reflects not only its grape-growing status, but its heritage as a leading agricultural region where dairies and specialty organic crops also have a major stake.

Genetically engineered crops in commercial production are now limited to field crops such as corn, cotton, canola and soybeans and spread across 118 million acres in the United States. Genetically engineered seeds were first made available to farmers in 1996.

In Sonoma County, corn is the only genetically modified crop being grown, and it's produced on fewer than 300 of the county's 1 million acres. The corn is used only for cattle feed.

If approved by voters, Measure M would prohibit genetically modified organisms from being raised or cultivated in Sonoma County for the next 10 years. To alter, or not to alter, is the question. A drive through Wine Country shows the split among growers who own the county's 60,000 acres of vineyards, which are now in the final weeks of harvest. It's common to see neighboring vineyards posted with dueling campaign signs that urge a "yes" vote for a GE-Free Sonoma County or a "no" vote by the Family Farmers Alliance, a group

formed to oppose the initiative.

That division is reflected in the viewpoints of Benziger and Dutton.

"We just don't know enough about genetic engineering to allow it to have widespread use," said Benziger of Benziger Family Winery, a leader in biodynamic grape growing. "We have to be very careful. Once these genetically engineered crops are released into the environment, it's irreversible."

"Putting a ban on this technology limits our future," said Dutton, 38, who farms more than 1,000 acres of vineyards with his younger brother, Joe, 36.

Genetic engineering is the process of copying a gene from one living organism - bacterium, plant or animal - and adding it to another living organism. Its implications are much greater for the future than for the present.

Measure M qualified for the ballot after a locally based group, GE-Free Sonoma County, gathered 45,000 signatures from county residents. David Henson, executive director of the Occidental Arts and Ecology Center, an 80-acre organic farm and resource center, wrote the initiative and is the measure's chief advocate.

Henson and anti-GMO forces are concerned there will be more genetically engineered crops, like apples and tomatoes, in the future. They fear there will be cross-pollination and genetic contamination of crops grown by organic farmers.

Grape growers' opposition to or support for the measure is largely philosophical because so far there are no genetically engineered grapevines growing in Sonoma County. Researchers believe it could be 10 to 20 years before a genetically engineered grapevine is developed as a tool in the battle against such common vine maladies as Pierce's disease and powdery mildew.

If adopted, Measure M will have an immediate impact on a handful of Sonoma County farmers who grow genetically engineered corn for dairy cows. These farmers are united in their support for genetically engineered crops. They are even more united in their opposition to Measure M.

"We are able to produce more corn on less land, which helps us to survive in the dairy business. It's been a benefit to us," said Valenti Aggio, 35, who farms GMO corn with his father, Val Aggio, 66, on a family dairy in northwest Santa Rosa.

Benziger and Dutton both base their positions on the long-range implications that genetic engineering could have on Sonoma County's wine industry. Scientists at UC Davis and other universities are conducting field trials on genetically engineered wine grapes, and while the results are far from promising, the research will continue whether or not Measure M passes.

Dutton believes in embracing the technology that promises to reshape global agricultural practices. Benziger said there may be benefits from biotechnology but urges caution in moving too fast until there is more scientific research. Reputation at stake? It's perception, as well as science, that worries Benziger and others.

"One of Sonoma County's strongest selling points is the purity and diversity of our environment," he said. "If that is jeopardized, we are giving up a comparative advantage in marketing our wine and food."

Benziger is concerned about Sonoma County's image if voters keep the door open for planting genetically engineered crops. Sometimes using terms like "Frankenfoods," opponents of genetic engineering say science is meddling with Mother Nature by mixing the DNA of different species such as bacteria and fish with plants.

Advocates of Measure M argue that even the perception that genetically altered grapes or vines could be part of the wine could tarnish the image of Sonoma County wines in a world already crowded with fine wine choices.

Dutton believes GMO crops are as safe as the potatoes, plums and other food crops developed by Santa Rosa plant wizard Luther Burbank. He said it's folly to thwart a scientific process that promises not only better grapevines but more food for an expanding world population.

"Genetic engineering is the future of farming," said Dutton. "If Sonoma County isn't part of that future, how can our farmers stay viable and how can agriculture survive?"

Benziger said that given the choice, consumers will select foods that do not contain GMOs and points to numerous food industry studies to back up the claim.

"We need to understand what the consumer wants," said Benziger.

Dutton doesn't think wine lovers really care if the grapevine producing the wine was developed through traditional crossbreeding or molecular re-engineering of genes.

"Most American consumers want a good bottle of chardonnay or pinot noir and don't think about the nuts and bolts of how it was produced," said Dutton. "Just like I don't think about how this cotton shirt I'm wearing was made from GMO cotton."

Measure M is opposed by the Sonoma County Grape Growers Association and United Winegrowers for Sonoma County, but there are members within both associations who disagree with the official stance. Several groups, including the North Coast Grape Growers Association and the Sonoma Valley Vintners and Growers Alliance, have not taken a position because members are so divided they could not reach a consensus. Farmers divided

Grape growers are not the only agricultural producers in Sonoma County divided by Measure M. Sonoma County farmers raising other crops and livestock also are taking

opposite sides on the issue of whether the county should be GMO free.

The Sonoma County Farm Bureau, the county's largest agricultural organization, opposes Measure M. But the Community Alliance with Family Farmers, a group of mostly small-scale farmers and organic producers, supports the initiative.

For organic farmers, it's a clear choice to reject biotechnology. To be certified organic, crops and livestock can't come from genetically modified organisms. There are concerns that GMO crops could genetically contaminate other crops and seed stocks through cross-pollination or the spread of seed carried by birds.

"Genetic engineering is a very new and powerful technology that could have some unfortunate circumstances," said organic farmer Keith Abeles of Sebastopol.

Abeles and business partner Kevin McEnnis grow organic tomatoes, peppers, onions, lettuce and other crops on a small farm in southwest Santa Rosa. They worry about consumer perception of local farm products if Sonoma County does not close the door to GMOs.

"I don't see the urgency to this technology," said Abeles. "The county's primary crops are not genetically engineered. There will not be that many farmers directly impacted if Measure M passes."

But perhaps the most visible grower of corn in Sonoma County has a different view.

Jim Groveman, who owns the Petaluma Pumpkin Patch but rents the land next to Highway 101 where it has been located for 11 years, said he could buy genetically modified corn but doesn't.

"I have no need for it," he said. The 4-acre square of land that sprouts with 10-foot-tall corn designed as a maze is small enough that he can weed it without spraying.

"But if I was a commercial grower, I would need it," he said, adding that he opposes Measure M. "It's the only way you can stay competitive in the market, in the world actually."

The Aggio family will be among those affected. They have harvested this year's corn crop, but if Measure M is approved, they could not grow their 50 acres of GMO corn for the next 10 years.

Val Aggio and his son grow Roundup Ready corn on their dairy, producing nearly half the feed needed by their 125 cows. This genetically engineered corn has a gene that makes it resistant to the herbicide Roundup.

Aggio said he can spray Roundup on his field to control weeds without killing the corn plants. He said controlling weeds in traditional corn requires more herbicide applications

and the results are less effective.

"We're brainstorming to figure out what else we can plant if we can't plant the Roundup Ready corn," said Valenti Aggio. "There are not a lot of options. It will be impossible to come up with another silage crop that so suits our land and summer growing season."

The Aggios also worry about the fallout from Measure M, whether it passes or not.

"Pitting one farmer against another is counterproductive," said Valenti Aggio.

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