

GE-Free Sonoma County
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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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**FARMERS, ENVIRONMENTALISTS FILE INITIATIVE
TO BAN GENETICALLY ENGINEERED CROPS**

Sonoma Among Half-dozen Counties Following Mendocino Victory

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Santa Rosa, California – Farmers and environmentalists joined forces today to keep genetically engineered crops out of Sonoma County. A new coalition, “GE-Free Sonoma County,” has been formed to promote a ballot measure and educate the public about the dangers of contamination to our farms, seed supplies, public lands and native ecosystems from genetically engineered (GE) organisms. Proponents say the measure is needed to protect the county’s agricultural economy, natural environment and public health.

Dave Henson, Director of Occidental Arts and Ecology Center and an author of the initiative, explains that “We are very concerned that our federal and state governments are planning to allow the release of dozens of new genetically engineered plants, fish, trees and bacteria into our farms, our environment and our bodies. No long-term studies have been done on the impacts of genetically engineered organisms, and none of them have been proven safe. It the right and responsibility of the people of Sonoma County to pass this initiative to protect our farms, our local economy, our children, and our future from harm by GE contamination.”

The proposed initiative seeks to prevent contamination of Sonoma County’s agriculture and environment by prohibiting “the propagation, cultivation, raising, growing, sale or distribution of transgenic organisms” within the county. The measure does not prohibit agricultural or medical research, and it exempts human food and animal feed products which already contain genetically engineered ingredients. If passed, the new ordinance would be enforced by the Sonoma County Agriculture Commissioner, who would ensure that prohibited GE organisms are destroyed or removed from the county. Violators who knowingly grow or raise GE plants, animals could be charged for all abatement costs, and fined a civil penalty of \$1,000.

Sonoma County is one of more than a half-dozen California counties seeking a ban on GE crops. Similar measures have qualified for the ballot in Marin and Butte counties, and are seeking to qualify in Alameda, Humboldt, Santa Cruz, San Luis Obispo and other counties. These grassroots efforts were inspired by a recent victory in Mendocino, which last March became the first county in the U.S. to pass an ordinance prohibiting GE crops.

According to Sonoma Valley wine grape, vegetable and olive grower Phil Coturri, owner of Enterprise Vineyards, "Farming has always been a way to bring people together. For 150 years, that is exactly what agriculture has done in Sonoma County. We cannot allow giant corporations to take our Ag out of our hands and replace it with their untested, poorly regulated transgenic organisms. We must pass this initiative to keep agriculture in Sonoma County the way it should be: homegrown."

Proponents also seeks to prevent national and international market losses for products from Sonoma County's farms, ranches and fisheries which would likely result from genetic contamination by transgenic organisms. Currently, dozens of California's international trading partners ban or restrict the importation of products containing GE ingredients, including the 25 nations of the European Union, as well as Japan, China, Canada, South Korea, Russia, Brazil and Mexico.

Julian Kayne, Director of Quality Assurance for Straus Family Creamery, which buys a large percentage of their milk from Sonoma County dairy producers, says that "Many of our producers grow their own crops for silage – vetch, oats, peas and bell beans. They can't afford to have those feed crops be contaminated with new GE varieties. If they're organic, they'd likely lose their organic certification, along with their premium markets. The cow, the farmer, the consumer and the environment are all better off without this stuff."

Henson adds, "We seek to protect the right to farm, so that those farmers who choose to farm without transgenic crop varieties can do so without having their crops and seed stocks genetically contaminated by pollen or seed brought by wind, insects, birds, animals, water, trucks or farm machinery from neighboring farms with transgenic varieties."

Renowned Chef and Restaurateur John Ash sees this as a issue of food quality and integrity, stating "For many years I have been an advocate of ethical food and ethical eating, which I define as knowing the life history of what you are eating –where it came from, who grew it, and how it was grown. In Sonoma County, we pride ourselves on the quality and integrity of our locally produced food and wine. This initiative will help insure that our local agriculture remains distinctive, and will allow us to continue to enjoy local, ethical food and eating."

GE crops and other organisms also pose a threat of contamination to wild species. Margaret Pennington, Chair of the 10,000 member Redwood Chapter of the Sierra Club, says "of particular concern to the Sierra Club are releases of genetically engineered organisms into the environment because they have such potential for detrimental and irreversible effects on natural ecosystems. The national Sierra Club has a very strong position against the release of GE organisms, calling for a moratorium on the planting of all genetically engineered crops and on the release of any GE organisms into the environment, including those now approved." Pennington also cites the Sierra Club's support of the 'precautionary principle' which requires that new substances and technologies not be used or released until proven safe for people and environment, placing the burden of proof on the manufacturer, rather than on regulators or citizens. This is the opposite of conventional approaches, which often assume them to be safe until shown to be harmful.

Campaign Coordinator Daniel Solnit expects to have volunteers on the streets gathering signatures starting July 3. He says that "public response has been overwhelmingly positive. This is an issue which crosses all political divisions; everybody wants to protect our farms, our health, and our quality of life."

The campaign can be reached at (707) 823-4410, or on the web at www.gefreesonoma.org.

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