

GMO ban drives voter interest

Sonoma County officials expect 70% turnout, cite Measure M; school bonds top Ukiah ballot

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North Coast voters go to the polls today to decide the fate of eight state propositions, as well as a controversial ban on genetically modified organisms in Sonoma County and a \$43 million Ukiah high school renovation.

Absentee ballots in Sonoma County came in at a fast pace Monday, which election officials said indicates heavy voter interest in Measure M. The initiative imposes a 10-year moratorium on cultivation of crops grown from genetically modified seed.

Elections official Janice Atkinson said about 61 percent of 129,000 absentee ballot had been returned by late Monday, compared with 71 percent returned at the same time in the 2004 general election.

Officials estimate about 70 percent of the county's 241,000 registered voters will have voted when polls close today at 8 p.m.

State election officials predict a much lower turnout, about 42 percent, while the California Field Poll says its surveys indicate 43 percent of 6.8 million registered voters will cast ballots.

"There was a traffic jam at the drive-up window and a long line at a special voter check-in desk in the hallway," Atkinson said Monday. "We're not far behind last year's presidential election, and it all depends on who votes Tuesday."

Atkinson reminded voters that absentee ballots turned in at polling places, at the central elections office or received in the mail today would not be tallied until the official vote canvass is conducted after unofficial results are released Tuesday night.

Mailed absentee ballots must be received today or they won't be counted at all, she added.

Today's special election was called by the governor to promote three initiatives: Proposition 74, which would lengthen teachers' probationary period from two years to five and make it easier to fire veteran teachers; Proposition 76, which would set a state spending limit and give the governor authority to make mid-year budget cuts; and Proposition 77, which would transfer the power to draw legislative boundaries from state lawmakers to a panel of retired judges.

Schwarzenegger later endorsed Proposition 75, which would require public employee unions to get written permission from members before using their dues for political purposes. Unions representing teachers, firefighters and nurses have been leading opponents of the Schwarzenegger package.

Two other propositions offer dueling visions to fix high prescription drug costs for the uninsured, while another seeks to re-regulate part of California's electricity market.

In Sonoma County, the Measure M ban on GMOs is the only countywide ballot issue. If approved by a majority of voters, it would affect only unincorporated areas of the county, just like any zoning ordinance.

In Mendocino County, the Ukiah school bond called Measure U requires a two-thirds vote for approval. The \$43 million bond measure would provide financing for construction of a new roof, an updated kitchen, a second gym, skylights, updated technology and new heating, air conditioning and ventilation systems for 27-year-old Ukiah High School.

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