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Both sides predict close vote on county GMO initiative

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As the heated campaign over Measure M winds down, principal spokesmen for both sides forecast a tight race.

"I can't imagine it not being close," said Dave Henson, campaign director of GE-Free Sonoma County as well as the executive director of the Occidental Arts and Ecology Center. "The only indicator we have is from our volunteers, who have been supporting the measure by calling people and knocking on doors to speak with residents.

"One of the things our volunteers are finding is that many of these people know nothing about Measure M. This is good for us, because it means that our personal contact is key. Thousands of people in the county now are grappling with this initiative."

"I have a feeling that this will be a close election," said Lex McCorvey, executive director of the Sonoma County Farm Bureau, the main opponent of the measure. "It is very challenging for voters, because they won't truly be voting on a single issue, and it's difficult for them to understand what the issues really are.

If it passes, Measure M would ban the growing of genetically modified organisms in Sonoma County for 10 years but allow changes or amendments to be made by a unanimous vote by the Board of Supervisors.

Both sides have been attempting to boost contributions recently to spread their message.

The Yes on M group accrued some \$115,000 in expenses from April 2004 to February 2005, when its supporters wrote the initiative and gathered signatures to put it on the ballot. Since March of 2005, the group has spent \$270,192.

Yes on M's largest reported expenditures during the Sept. 25-Oct. 22 period were \$43,768 to Hired Gun Media and \$19,385 to Lowell Finley for legal work.

The group reported receiving \$387,201 in monetary contributions and \$991 in non-monetary contributions, for a total of \$388,192 during the campaign. The majority of the contributions, \$281,033, came from the OAEC. During the Sept. 25-Oct. 22 reporting period, OAEC contributed \$72,435, and 91 other individuals or organizations contributed

from \$100 to \$1,250. Two contributions, cumulatively totaling \$3,000, have been made after the reporting date.

No on M has reported spending \$431,812 for its campaign, which began in March of this year.

The group's main expenses from Sept. 25-Oct. 22 were \$117,149 to Muelrath Public Affairs of Santa Rosa, \$48,297 (including \$37,076 for postage) to AD-Vantage Marketing of Santa Rosa, \$31,509 to Greater Works Printing and Graphics, Inc. of Rohnert Park and \$23,323 to Olson, Hagel and Fishburn LLP of Sacramento.

No on M reports that it has gained \$319,835 in monetary contributions and \$90,000 in loans since its campaign began. The Sonoma County Farm Bureau, which this year has given \$140,891, loaned \$90,000 and donated \$10,731.10 in non-monetary contributions, has been the major financial supporter.

Other large contributors include the California Farm Bureau Federation of Sacramento, Hunt & Behrens, Inc. of Petaluma and Western United Dairymen of Modesto, each of which gave \$10,000 during the latest reporting period. Two days after the reporting period ended, E and J Gallo Winery of Modesto also gave \$10,000 to the campaign, and nine other contributions cumulatively totaling \$27,500, were made.

Muelrath Public Affairs paid \$104,550 during the reporting period on behalf of the No on M committee, including \$28,364 to Comcast's Redwood Empire Zone and \$28,585 to Comcast's Santa Rosa zone.

Funding is critical as proponents and opponents are striving to gain potentially important last-minute support before the Nov. 8 election.

"We'll be stepping up our television and radio spots," McCorvey said. "We'll continue trying to educate the public as much as we can about the reality of the measure. Our message has been pretty clear regarding the negative impact it would have on agriculture and taxpayers.

"We have a very broad-based coalition of agricultural and business organizations, and they are united in realizing the pitfalls of Measure M."

Henson counters that local farmers are split on the initiative, and that 150 to 200 of them have endorsed the initiative. The Yes on M campaign has won votes through personal contact, he said.

"Our company is grassroots and volunteer-based, and we have relied on literally hundreds of people to communicate one-to-one with people," Henson said. "A staff of about 150 volunteers has called thousands of people in Sonoma County, and at least that many have been knocking on doors. We will rely on them even more during the final days of the campaign.

"The consequences of the vote are tremendous for the economic and agricultural future of

this county. Do people want to stand up for biological diversity or let two (GMO-producing) companies steamroll them?"

McCorvey and Henson continue to criticize each other's campaign for allegedly presenting misleading information and scare tactics.

"And with so many different aspects, there's great potential for collateral damage. It's very important the voters to understand that the initiative isn't about prohibiting GE foods, as [opponents of the measure] have suggested," Henson said.

"If I ever get worried, it's because of the wall of propaganda from my opponents, but I'm sure they would say the same thing about us," Henson said. "As I was driving in my car, I heard a scary Farm Bureau advertisement on the radio saying that the county Public Health Department claims people won't be able to get the drugs they need if the initiative passes. This is simply a lie."

The spokesmen also criticize each other's financial records.

"We've run a grassroots campaign, and 90 percent of the money we've received has come from local farmers and ranchers," McCorvey said. "In comparison, less than 1 percent of our opponent's money has come from agriculture.

"The evil part of campaigns is that you never have as much money as you would like. We purposely didn't take money from Monsanto (the main producer of GMOs) because it seemed to be a recipe for failure. In Mendocino County (where an anti-GMO passed) several donations from Monsanto Corp. and other businesses outside the county were accepted, and many residents perceived this as trying to buy votes."

Henson claims that No on M hasn't carefully disclosed their expenditures.

"I've read over the financial reports from both sides very carefully," he said. "Organizations need to report their campaign expenditures down to a paper clip, and I've been sure to do this with the OAEC, including half of my salary and part of the salaries of some other staff members. Our opponents haven't reported some of their staff expenditures, though."

Henson doesn't know exactly what he will do if the initiative fails.

"I've been focusing on helping the initiative to pass, so I haven't thought about it," he said. "Regardless of what happens, there will be a continuance of groups who were behind Measure M. They will continue to push for a more sustainable, diverse, farmer-friendly and environmental-friendly system. I'm not sure how this will play out, though."

He doesn't plan to introduce another ballot measure if Measure M is defeated.

"Initiatives are best used only rarely, in cases where government fails to take action when it is required," he said.

Whatever the outcome, he hopes that a time of healing will follow the divisive, sometimes bitter campaign.

"After the election, I hope that the divisiveness will translate into an opportunity to come together and determine how to enhance the environmental and food security in this county," he said.

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