

Argus Courier Online

<http://www.arguscourier.com/news/news/gmoinitiative050831.html>

© Argus Courier and The Santa Rosa Press Democrat. Visit our User Agreement page at <http://www.pressdemocrat.com/services/agreement.html>

Debate heats up over county GMO initiative

August 31, 2005

By DAN JOHNSON
ARGUS-COURIER STAFF

The two groups, firmly planted on opposite sides of a rural Sonoma County fence, each depict themselves as dedicated friends of "the people" seeking to boost agricultural production, the economy, health and human rights, and often portray their opponents as ignorant, self-serving rascals whose scare tactics leave people shaking in their boots.

Actually, both groups have done extensive research and are working around the clock to spread their viewpoints to Petalumans and other county residents on a highly charged issue that they agree has extraordinary short- and long-term implications.

Underlying these general similarities, however, lie extremely different perspectives on an ordinance that seeks to prevent agricultural and environmental contamination from genetically engineered (transgenic) organisms -- plants, animals or microorganisms whose genetic code has been altered to give them characteristics that they naturally don't have.

Although much of the general public still is unfamiliar with the GMO debate, it has become one of the hottest squabbles in recent memory, sometimes bitterly dividing communities and even households. Several countries, including Australia, Brazil, China, the 25 nations of the European Union, Indonesia, Japan, Mexico, Russia and South Korea, already have legal bans or restrictions on the planting of transgenic crops. Marin and Mendocino counties recently passed similar ordinances, while several other California counties rejected them.

"Sonoma County needs to pass this initiative because the federal and state governments are asleep at the wheel in regulating GMOs," Henson said. "Contaminating the genetic source of food products threatens food security, and by comparison dwarves other environmental threats."

GE foods were introduced into the United States in the mid-1990s. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration ruled that these foods are "substantially equivalent" to other foods, but many government scientists caution that the genetic engineering process is unpredictable and could present new hazards to human health and the environment.

"I do not contend that all genetic technologies are bad, or that they all lead to a threat of ecological or agricultural contamination," he said. "Much of the research into transgenic technologies is very exciting, and may offer great potential to farmers and others around the globe."

"However, the current GE crops being grown -- mainly corn, canola, soy and cotton -- have, in fact, proven to be seriously harmful to our U.S. agricultural economy, to our farmers' rights and to our natural ecosystems almost everywhere they are grown."

Henson feels that without regulations, farmers' rights are violated because GE crops from neighboring farms will contaminate other farmers' crops and seed stacks through pollen or seeds brought by wind, winter, animals, birds, insects and trucks and farm machinery.

"Farms from miles away can be affected," he said.

Advocates claim that people's health could be impaired by inhaling GE pollen, eating GE plants and being exposed to toxic herbicides and pesticides that are used to kill new "super weeds" and "super bugs" that emerge as farm pests evolve resistance to GE crops.

"We would have herbicide-tolerant super weeds growing by the side of the road in Petaluma and other places. This initiative isn't just about agricultural crops," Henson said.

He contends that the initiative would help protect Sonoma County's ecosystems from irreversible genetic contamination by GE plants, fish and trees.

"From an ecological perspective, genetic engineering can be disastrous. It boggles the mind to think about the consequences, because it could impact all domestic food products. Some back-crossing of DNA from genetically engineered crops to native relatives already has occurred in corn, cotton and canola," he said.

Henson emphasizes the possible long-term risks of using transgenic organisms.

"Once they enter the environment, there's no turning back because they start spreading and contaminating other crops and wild plants," he said, adding that Monsanto and the handful of other chemical companies creating GE products have been driven by greed rather than public welfare.

Lex McCorvey, the executive director of the Sonoma County Farm Bureau and the Sonoma County Family Farmers Alliance, which was created to defeat the initiative, is on the other side of the big fence from Henson, and it's clear that their ideas haven't cross-pollinated.

"After a lengthy analysis, the SCFB believes that the benefits of genetic engineering far outweigh any of the perceived risks," he said. "It will benefit the local agriculture, environment, economy and health care."

He contends that the initiative would stifle the agricultural industry, and that local farms could suffer a competitive disadvantage.

"In agriculture, people need to deal with many outside influences, and any effort we can make that allows them the tools they need to stay in business is positive," he said. "Also, we haven't found any negative long-term ramifications to consuming genetically engineered products. Companies need to go through an eight-to-12-year regulatory process before these products are approved."

McCorvey feels that the county's grape industry would be at a competitive disadvantage if it couldn't use a disease-resistant vine stock being developed and that dairies would suffer because they wouldn't be able to grow their own genetically modified silage.

"We have a lot of dairy farms in Petaluma, and this initiative could be very damaging to them," he said.

McCorvey also feels that genetic engineering can help, rather than harm, the environment.

"I haven't seen any evidence that it will harm ecosystems," he said. "I'm more concerned with deforestation and how it can destroy redwood trees. We need to find new ways to protect the integrity of ecosystems.

"Jonas Salk wouldn't have developed a polio vaccine if people were prevented from doing something unless it has been conclusively proven without exception."

While supporters of the initiative claim that all enforcement costs would be paid by violators, McCorvey estimates that it would be difficult to enforce, and could cost around \$250,000 annually to implement. He also criticizes proponents' claim that the initiative allows for medical research in a contained environment.

"Most communities require only a level-1 laboratory. A contained environment is a level-3 laboratory, and no biotech company would want to build one here when it isn't required anywhere else in the world," he said.

Despite the strong disagreements, Henson and McCorvey share one common view.

Many people don't understand the impact that the initiative will have, and need to become better informed, they both said, still standing on opposite sides of the fence.

(Contact Dan Johnson at djohnson@arguscourier.com)