

Farmers splitting over Measure M

GE Free crop ban bringing farmers to the streets

by Patricia M. Roth - Sonoma West Staff Writer

Farmers have long been divided between those who use chemicals and those who do not, but their work is done in the quiet of the field and the barn. They choose their production methods - whether certified organic or conventional - and go about planting seeds, milking cows and tending vineyards.

Those quiet days are over, at least for now. Farmers and their farming methods have been catapulted into the spotlight as a new dynamic has entered farm production that's radically different from the typical tools of the trade: genetically engineered (GE) organisms or genetically modified (GMO) organisms.

On Nov. 8, Sonoma County citizens must decide whether to vote yes or no for Measure M, the ballot initiative that would place a 10-year moratorium on genetically engineered crops. A "no" vote means that GE crops would be allowed here. A "yes" vote means that GE crops would not be allowed here.

Now the farmers whom people have trusted to supply them with food must put their trust in voters. Not easy, some say, because the issue is complex and pickled with politics. Farmers on both sides are trying to get the word out. They've left the harvest and towed kids along to press conferences or to walk precincts; they've stopped their tractors mid-field and interrupted evening meals to take calls from the press; they're speaking with passion and conviction, all.

Opponents of Measure M don't want to be told what kind of crops they can grow in their fields. Supporters of Measure M, including the majority of the county's organic growers, don't want to be controlled by the corporate seed and pesticide interests.

"It gets to be a real political football," said Paul Kolling, a Sebastopol-based organic apple farmer. "Here you have the Farm Bureau who says farmers are united against Measure M. It's a bald-faced lie. I'm a member of the Farm Bureau and I don't support this measure."

"The farming community is divided, no doubt about it," said George Davis, vice president of Community Alliance with Family Farmers (CAFF) and owner of Porter Creek Vineyards in Healdsburg. "They (opponents) are doing a good job of promoting their position."

Opposition to the GMO ban is being led by the Sonoma County Farm Bureau, a conservative organization. Sebastopol resident Doug Beretta, a third generation dairyman, is first vice president of the board and a Measure M opponent. "Personally, I don't really like it (the division). We're all farmers," he said.

"The main reason I'm opposed to Measure M as a dairyman is that it's going to put a lot of restrictions on us," said Beretta. Although he doesn't grow RoundUp Ready corn, a GE variety manufactured by Monsanto, he said Measure M would limit the rights of others to do so. "Four or five dairymen grow RoundUp Ready corn in the county. They're real happy with it. They get more production, they spray it once and they don't have to go over it as many times with their tractor cultivating and spraying for other weeds."

Domenic Carinelli, Jr. whose family has owned and operated a dairy business since 1921 and who also grows grapes, opposes Measure M.

He said dairymen have to use the latest in science to keep pace with the industry. "Our cows produce twice as much milk as they did 40 years ago. It's done through breeding and cross breeding and genetic improvements. That's what keeps you in business." He said he wants to be free to buy GMO corn in Sonoma County, rather than to waste resources to haul it in. "You'd have to pay for the extra haul. That would be ridiculous," he said.

But Sharon Bice of Sebastopol's Redwood Hill Farm and Creamery said that she and her sister, Jennifer, support the ban was for the health of their goats. "What's important to us and for the consumers of our goats' milk is the grain. We don't want GMOs in the grain. What goes into the goats determines the quality of the milk that they produce. We need to keep GMO-free grains available," she said.

Supporters of the ban point out that genetically modified seed is self-propagating and can cross into other related species, contaminating them and dominating other plants and seeds. Kolling recently found out that his neighbor was growing GMO corn. "It's contaminating the air space and I have no control over it. They regulate organic farms but they don't regulate chemical drift. When the wind blows, it's tough luck. It's just a matter of time before there are GMO apple trees," he said.

Vince Scholten of Sebastopol, who grows bananas, tropicals, perennials and vegetables, questioned why "a couple of corn growers have the power to cross-pollinate every other organic corn farmer in the entire county. Why isn't there a stop to that?" He likened it to owning cattle that need to be fenced in to stay on a rancher's land. "What Monsanto is doing is taking the fences down and letting the cattle go in my corn patch and eat it all - and then turning around and charging you for that opportunity. It's a sad day when that happens. We need to change politics."

He is referring to claims that Monsanto patents GMO seeds and crops, polices farmers who grow them and charges farmers who have them, intentional or not.

Steve Dutton, who farms apples and grapes with his brother, Joe, in Sebastopol, doesn't think cross pollination is an issue and opposes the ban. "The yes on Measure M people should really think about how things pollinate before they worry about cross pollination. Most plants don't cross pollinate with other plants."

However, supporters of the ban said that organic farmers are at risk of losing their certification as a result of contamination from pollen of genetically modified crops. This would ruin the reputations that organic farmers have worked hard to build, said Ken Orchard of Sebastopol. As the owner of Orchard Farms, he grows and sells 75 varieties of certified organic mixed vegetables.

"People would assume that our organic labels were less meaningful. People who ask for organic would be skeptical and want to make sure there are no GMOs in my crops.

Farmers in favor of GE crops said that they lead to the use of fewer pesticides. "I really agree with the environmental community that we've got to get away from sprays and pesticides. This is our only chance to do that. It's costly and who likes to spray poison all over their fields?" said Carinelli Jr..

Lou Preston, a winery owner and organic grape grower in Healdsburg, said claims of herbicide and pesticide reduction through the use of genetically modified crops has not been borne out. "It's not working," he said. "There are lots of reports of weed resistance that are cropping up.

"I'm a grape grower but it's not an issue of rootstock or Pierce's disease. It's really about the future. It's a matter of control and about preserving diversity in agriculture. In a sense, we've already lost it you look at the farmscape of Sonoma County and it's a serious monoculture."

"There are people out there who don't want to hear anything you have to say. There are people out in the public that go, 'you guys are crazy, you're stopping progress.' We're not stopping progress. Do the research. How does it cross pollinate? How does it affect other crops?" said Scholten.

Dutton summarized his opposition to Measure M. "My stand is based on what does the future hold. No one knows yet and if genetic engineering is the future, to stay in farming and keep my farm in farmland, I want to plant whatever the future may hold. I don't want to be limited by it. The whole idea is to preserve what we do for the next generation," he said.

Managing Editor Barry Dugan contributed to this article.