

07/05/05 - Biotech crop bans face 'hijack' threat

By Keri Brenner, Marin Independent Journal

Marin's biotech crop ban, approved by voters last November, could be threatened by "hijacking" attempts in the state Legislature that would pre-empt county ordinances, local activists said.

"They're trying to sneak it in at the end of the legislative session," said Mark Squire, leader of GMO Free Marin, which spearheaded the successful Measure B initiative last year. "The end of the Legislature (session) is traditionally the way to sneak things in so there's not time for opposition to build or for the public to make a lot of comment."

Squire, owner of Good Earth Natural Foods in Fairfax, made his comments in the wake of last week's two attempts by legislators to amend bills in the state Assembly and Senate.

The process of cutting and pasting bills to insert new language is referred to as "hijacking." The amended bills, which are slated to be heard again this week, would remove local government authority over any seed regulations.

"We feel it's typical of the way the biotech industry has attempted to market their technology by avoiding public debate," Squire said.

Genetically engineered crops - also called GMOs for genetically modified organisms, or biotech crops - refer to crops in which the DNA in seeds has been altered to add a specific quality, such as resistance to pesticides or disease. Proponents say genetically modified crops - such as some types of corn, wheat, soy and rice - increase farm production and streamline farming costs.

Opponents, however, say the biotech industry's interest in the altered crops is financial. If the companies can control the seed patents, they can force farmers to pay for new seeds every year, critics say.

Marin is one of three counties, along with Mendocino and Trinity, with a ban on cultivation of genetically altered crops.

Fairfax Councilman Frank Egger said he will introduce an item at tonight's Town Council meeting to oppose any "GMO pre-emption

legislation." He is organizing Marin activists to appear in Sacramento this week to request the Legislature vote "no" on the two bills.

"The sneaky move is similar to the pesticide industry's pre-empting the right of Mendocino County to prohibit aerial pesticide spraying after the California Supreme Court upheld their voters' right to that ban," Egger said. "That legislative pre-emption then covered all 478 cities and 58 counties in California."

Squire's and Egger's comments come as a new statewide farm group, the California Healthy Foods Coalition, announced it was forming to provide more public education and grassroots programs on the benefits of biotechnology.

"Family farmers understand some people have questions about biotechnology," said California Farm Bureau President Bill Pauli. "Our coalition will provide people with the facts and will support agricultural innovations that will improve the quality of life for California consumers."

The group has engaged a public relations firm, Sacramento-based River City Communications, to launch a series of media announcements explaining the coalition's intent and purpose.

"California's family farmers serve an important role in providing safe and healthy food to consumers around the world," said River City President Marko Mlikotin.

At issue in the current campaign is a genetically engineered crop ban initiative approved for the November ballot in Sonoma County. Sonoma's ballot measure was withdrawn last year after a technical flaw, but it has been revamped and reintroduced.

Farm bureaus across the state - including the Marin County Farm Bureau - opposed the series of biotech crop bans on the California ballot last November. Marin farm officials said even though Marin does not have any biotech crops, they wanted to have the flexibility to use any new technologies they felt could be helpful in their operations.

A ban was approved in Marin by 61 percent of voters, but similar measures were defeated in Butte and San Luis Obispo counties.

"Measure B won by 61 percent after an open public discourse around the GMO issue," Squire said. "When people have a chance

to hear the story, they do the right thing."

Renata Brillinger of Californians for GE-Free Agriculture of Occidental said the legislative attempts in Sacramento were "part of a nationally coordinated highjacking of local democratic rights by the biotechnology industry."

Similar laws have been attempted or passed into law in 15 other states, she said.

"The measure is driven by narrow private interests seeking to protect their economic stake by convincing members of the Legislature to strip away the democratic rights of their own constituents," Brillinger said.

The state bills in question are Assembly Bill 1508 and Senate Bill 1056. Assemblymen Simon Salinas, D-Salinas, and Juan Arambula, D-Fresno, and Sen. Dean Florez, D-Bakersfield, wrote the amendments.

"We feel that Marin does have the right to protect our health, farms and environment from GMOs that the state and federal governments regulate so poorly," Squire said. "It is obvious that the federal government, whose job it is to protect us from such risky technologies, is asleep at the wheel."