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[CAMPAIGN 2005: Sonoma County Measure to ban genetically altered crops causes split Farmers, ranchers and grape growers have a lot at stake](#)

- Jim Doyle, Chronicle Staff Writer
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From one end of Sonoma County to the other, Measure M -- a ballot measure to ban genetically engineered crops for 10 years -- is deeply dividing farmers and ranchers whose agriculture production is valued at more than \$525 million a year.

If voters approve the measure Nov. 8, Sonoma County would become the fourth county in California, after Marin, Mendocino and Trinity counties, to outlaw the use of genetically altered seeds and other organisms.

"It certainly would not be good for our image to have genetically engineered grapes, if we can at all avoid it," said George Davis, owner of Porter Creek Vineyards in Healdsburg and a supporter of Measure M. "We have an image of pure, wholesome wine that comes from very traditional, wholesome sources, grown by small farmers using traditional methods -- certainly not by factory farming and laboratory tinkering."

But other vintners say that genetically modified grapes may eventually be needed to halt, for example, the glassy-winged sharpshooter, an insect that has spread Pierce's disease to California grapevines.

Doug Baretta, a third-generation rancher in Santa Rosa, grows bioengineered corn to feed his livestock. The result, he said, is increased yields because of less damage by pests, reduced herbicide and pesticide applications, less labor, lower fuel costs and less fuel emissions.

"This isn't a food safety issue," he said. "It's just putting us as farmers at a disadvantage to farmers in other counties. The way the measure is written, it's going to affect some of us with the amount of feed that we can grow. It will also affect the vaccines that we can use on our cattle."

The board of directors of the Sonoma County Grape Growers Association decided recently to oppose Measure M, although hundreds of the members belonging to the association are split on the issue.

Chemical manufacturers, biotech industry executives and corporate farming interests view

Measure M as an important test case. They say a new generation of disease-resistant crops from genetically engineered seeds holds the promise of feeding more people, using a lot less land.

More biotech crops and seeds are being introduced to the market, such as new varieties of alfalfa, squash, turf grass and papaya. The Central Valley is planted heavily with transgenic corn and cotton.

Measure M would establish a 10-year moratorium in Sonoma on the "propagation, cultivation, raising, growing, sale or distribution of transgenic organisms." It exempts bioengineered ingredients found in foodstuffs such as sodas, crackers or cookies. It would permit genetic-related research on plants to be conducted only in certain labs where pollen can be contained. It would allow farmers to import bioengineered feedstock from other counties. The county's agricultural commissioner could fine violators of the ordinance as much as \$1,000.

By unanimous vote, the county's Board of Supervisors could exempt newly created transgenic organisms needed to help battle disease or crop infestations.

Measure M has become a high stakes, politically charged campaign. Opponents have begun airing two TV spots and a radio ad. Total campaign spending is expected to exceed \$700,000.

Each side accuses the other of using fear tactics. They disagree on whether biotech crops demand more or less pesticides; whether genetically modified foods are as nutritious as conventional foods; and whether the proposed law would limit availability of bioengineered medical and veterinary vaccines.

Some family farmers, including certified organic farmers, say the use of bioengineered seeds will cause the genetic contamination of local agriculture and ecosystems and threaten the economic viability of small farms.

Still others say bioengineered foods may pose a health risk to consumers and allow the Monsanto Co. and other large firms to reap huge profits from having a patented monopoly on genetically modified seeds for basic staples such as rice, corn, cotton, canola and soy beans.

"The state of California has zero regulatory structure to monitor genetically engineered crops, fish and trees," said Dave Henson, the primary author of Measure M. "The risk is far too high to have government asleep on this."

Lex McCorvey, executive director of the Sonoma County Farm Bureau, holds an opposite view.

"There's this whole fear-based campaign to believe that people are getting sick from eating these products, and it's been refuted," he said. The moratorium would devastate the county's farmers and ranchers, he added, resulting in farmland being sold to developers -- claims that Measure M backers deny.

The county's Grape Growers Association's board of directors voted unanimously to oppose Measure M for reasons including its belief that federal agencies are adequately regulating genetic engineering, Executive Director Nick Frey said. The proposed law also would expose

the county to significant liability for cleaning up accidental releases of genetic organisms, he added.

In addition to the measures approved by voters in Marin and Mendocino counties, the Trinity County Board of Supervisors passed a similar ban last year. Voters in Butte, San Luis Obispo and Humboldt counties have rejected such initiatives. Several counties in the San Joaquin Valley have passed resolutions supporting biotech crops.

Marin County's ban was passed without organized opposition. Critics of Mendocino County's ban spent about \$820,000, led by contributions from CropLife America, a trade association representing companies such as Monsanto, Dow and Dupont.

State lawmakers have introduced bills that would give state officials the authority to pre-empt county ordinances regulating genetically engineered crops. The measures take no position for or against bioengineered crops.

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