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Two sides far apart on GMO ban

Forum on ballot measure highlights sharp disagreements on benefits and risks of genetically altered crops

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By COREY YOUNG  
ARGUS-COURIER STAFF

Are genetically modified crops a threat to Sonoma County's premium farm products and a looming risk to organic growers? Or are they harmless and beneficial to farmers?

At a Petaluma forum on genetically modified organisms last week, the answer depended on who you asked.

Those on each side of Measure M -- a countywide ballot measure this November that would ban GMOs for 10 years -- presented sharply differing accounts of whether those altered crops cause concern among farmers, the effects of the ban on medical and veterinary treatments and the validity of the measure itself.

Written and supported by a group called GE-Free Sonoma and the Occidental Arts and Ecology Center, Measure M is needed as a "time-out" so scientists, researchers and farmers can learn more about the effects of genetically engineered seeds on local agriculture, said Daniel Solnit, the Yes-on-M campaign coordinator.

But such seed can lead to crops that require less pesticide and other tending, so that farmers can grow products cheaper and faster and compete in a world that is just beginning to realize the benefits of genetically enhanced food, said Lex McCorvey, executive director of the Sonoma County Farm Bureau, which is opposing Measure M along with the Sonoma County Grape Growers Association.

During the 90-minute forum at the Petaluma Community Center, attended by about 45 people, McCorvey and Solnit painted vastly different pictures of what Measure M will and won't do.

Both sides accused the other of relying on "junk science" and disagreed over which side has the backing of farmers and vintners. They clashed over whether the measure is written as sound law and were 180 degrees apart as to whether medical vaccines would be banned as well.

"This measure will limit our access to health care," McCorvey said, adding that 12 vaccines for animals would be outlawed under Measure M because they have genetically enhanced traits.

"The Sonoma County initiative has no exemption for medical uses," he said.

Solnit responded that the measure does indeed exempt medical research and that vaccines used by both doctors and veterinarians won't be banned.

"Our best legal and scientific information has told us this does not apply to vaccines," he said. "We are not banning any drug, any vaccine. This is about crops."

The danger to Sonoma County farmers, Solnit said, is if genetically engineered seeds from one field contaminate another. Once that happens, how the group of second crops will respond is not clear -- but Sonoma County shouldn't risk finding out, he said.

"In the absence of adequate testing, we don't think it's a good idea to gamble with Sonoma County's agricultural heritage and economy," Solnit said. "Once you get that stuff in your field, it's very hard to get rid of it. We don't think Sonoma County should be the testing ground for this technology."

Calling Measure M "the most important initiative that voters in our county will vote on," McCorvey said the use of GMOs is "a new tool" that can increase profits for the county's small farmers while fighting insects and other agricultural pests.

"There is no evidence that genetically engineered food isn't safe," he said, dismissing studies cited by the measure's supporters.

Genetically engineered technology will produce "safer, more nutritious foods," McCorvey said.

"We are just on the cutting edge in terms of what it can do for us," he said.

Solnit said while most Sonoma County crops aren't currently genetically engineered, "our concern is they could be in a few years. This is a preventative ordinance. We should step back and take a time-out until the research is done."

But passing Measure M will not only lead to high taxpayer costs for cleaning up any farmland found with genetically altered crops, it will also put local farmers and ranchers "at a competitive disadvantage," McCorvey argued.

He cited his own experience as a cattle rancher and said the use of pesticide-resistant alfalfa is a cheaper way to grow feed for animals.

"I won't have to use herbicides because of my ability to use a product like Round-up Ready alfalfa," McCorvey said.

Solnit rebutted that the responsibility for cleaning up contaminated farmland lies with the violator who grew the genetically engineered crop in the first place. And he said there are

exemptions written into the proposal for using engineered animal feed.

The Sonoma County attorney's analysis of Measure M says the measure will prohibit growing genetically engineered animal feed, but allows the import and sale of such feed. And licensed medical and agricultural research using genetic engineering is allowed, so long as the altered organism is contained from reproducing, as called for in federal guidelines.

As for cleaning up contaminated fields, the costs could range from "nominal" to \$86,000 per acre, the county auditor found.

"This cost is assumed to be paid by the violator," the county's fiscal impact statement says. In the case of an unknown violator, "the initiative assumes the county would be responsible for cost."

But Solnit said the campaign for Measure M believes those estimated costs are inflated and it could actually cost less than \$100 for violators.

And he said if a genetically engineered solution for Pierce's Disease, which attacks grape vines, is discovered while Measure M is in effect, he believes county supervisors will vote to make an exception to the no-GMO rule because "it's not a contamination threat."

A vote of all five supervisors would be needed to overturn provisions of Measure M if it passes on Nov. 8.

(Contact Corey Young at [cyoung@arguscourier.com](mailto:cyoung@arguscourier.com))

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