

## More California Counties to Vote on Banning Genetically Engineered Crops

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By *[Lynn Alley](#)*

In March, Mendocino County made national headlines when its residents [voted to ban](#) the use of genetically modified organisms (GMOs), becoming the first county in the nation to prohibit genetically engineered livestock and produce.

Since then, other counties in Northern California and the Central Coast have been moving in that direction. Activist groups in Butte, Humboldt, Marin and San Luis Obispo (home to the Edna Valley, Arroyo Grande and Paso Robles appellations) counties have all gathered the requisite number of signatures to place GMO-ban initiatives on their local November ballots.

In Alameda County, which is home to the Livermore Valley appellation, an anti-GMO group is trying to get the board of supervisors to voluntarily put an initiative on the November ballot. "Should that fail, then we'll begin the process of gathering signatures," said Mitch Triplett, spokesman for GE-Free Alameda County.

But perhaps the most important addition to the growing list, at least for wine lovers, is that of Sonoma County, which is one of the state's prime wine regions and where wine grapes are the No. 1 agricultural commodity.

On Monday, a coalition of environmentalists and organic farmers calling themselves "GE-Free Sonoma" said they will seek a ballot measure to prohibit the propagation, cultivation, raising, growing, sale or distribution of genetically modified plants, livestock and fish in the county.

"This is not an environmentalists versus farmers initiative," said David Henson, one of the authors of the Sonoma measure and head of the Occidental Arts and Ecology Center, which promotes sustainable and organic agriculture. "This is farmers and environmentalists coming together to prevent genetic contamination of our farms and ecosystem."

Henson said the proposed initiative does not cover the sale of foods containing GMOs, nor does it prohibit "agricultural or medical research under properly controlled conditions."

The initiative contains an escape clause that would allow the board, through a unanimous vote, to exempt a commodity or item from the law. "If we find a cure for Pierce's disease,

for instance, we can exempt that from the law," Henson said, referring to a fatal vine malady that poses a threat to the state's wine industry.

To allow the board to reevaluate its stance based on new scientific findings, the measure also contains a "sunset clause" that ends the legal enforceability of the ordinance after 10 years, Henson said. At that time, the supervisors may elect to extend the ordinance another 10 years by a majority vote.

GE-Free Sonoma claims bioengineered organisms have not been sufficiently studied and may threaten human health, natural biodiversity and markets abroad for farm products.

Proponents of GMOs, including CropLife America, an industry group that represents biotech companies such as Monsanto and DuPont, have said genetic modifications could help prevent disease and pests from plaguing crops and vineyards.

"Farmers should be able to choose whatever tools best meet their growing needs and practices," said Lisa Dry, a spokeswoman for the Biotechnology Industry Organization (BIO), an advocacy group.

The Sonoma County Farm Bureau, a nongovernmental organization representing Sonoma farmers, has not decided what side it will take in the debate, as its board of directors has not yet looked over the initiative. "Certainly we want the [bio]technology to be safe," said executive director Lex McCorvey. "But then there are a lot of things we've done in the past that are not safe, but we move on."

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