

Warf: Moratorium needed on genetically modified crops

Contributed by Haji Warf
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This Tuesday, Oct. 13, at 1:30 p.m., the Lake County Board of Supervisors will hear the final report from the Genetically Engineered (GE) Crops Advisory Committee, members of which were appointed by the Lake County Board of Supervisors late last year. Anyone concerned about the introduction of genetically modified organisms (GMOs) into Lake County's farming community should not miss this meeting.

After nine months of meetings, what has the GE Crops committee learned?

As a member of the public who attended nearly all of the meetings and who paid close attention to the wide-ranging and oftentimes contentious discussions, I can only conclude that the issue of allowing the cultivation of GMOs in Lake County is an intractable problem with entrenched interests.

Nothing of substance has resulted in all this time with no concrete recommendations to be made to the Board of Supervisors. Despite a heroic effort, the committee barely scratched the surface on the mountain of data available out there (and still coming) regarding the effects of genetically modified crops on organic and conventional farming, our native plants and animal species, and the very health of our citizens, among many other vital interests in our community.

Co-existence between conventional or organic and pro-GMO farming has not been proven to be successful anywhere yet known, and I anticipate it to be practically impossible anytime soon with what little guidance and insufficient safeguards are available to date. And distrust resulting from fear on both sides of the issue guarantees no substantial concessions will be made.

So, if no compromise yet exists, what are our options?

Right now, farmers in Lake County adhere to the "first in time, first in right" doctrine, essentially allowing anyone to grow anything at anytime – so long as they do it first. If a farmer chooses to plant genetically modified seeds in the next growing season and no one finds out about it, not a soul will have the right to protest forever thereafter.

Without a requirement for public disclosure in place, how will any neighboring organic farmer ever know the genetic purity of his product if GMO pollen secretly drifts onto his farm? How will he even know to test? All the while, his economic interests will have been compromised without his knowing it – organic standards prohibit GMOs, and should the farmer's land or product be contaminated, he could lose his certification and thus, his livelihood.

And, once these manmade genes are let loose into the wider environment, it is virtually impossible to contain or remove them. It is the proverbial Genie being released from its bottle.

If we as a community are not deliberate in the manner in which we proceed, Lake County will surely relinquish its right to self-determination, simply through widespread exposure to genetically modified seeds that is sure to come.

For a county whose legacy is so steeped in the frontier spirit, it will be a shame to allow our future to be determined purely by happenstance – and to be perpetually under the thumb of the GMO seed companies on whose products our farmers will rely without end.

The fact is, all genetically modified seeds are patented and farmers are forbidden from harvesting seeds from resultant crops for future use. This means our farmers will be contractually obligated to buy seeds every year, as well as the other products designed to be used with them, such as pesticides. If we allow this to happen, the very existence of our farming community is jeopardized by its absolute dependence on these companies for survival.

By doing nothing now, this will be our inevitable fate.

My hope is that the Board of Supervisors will employ the precautionary principle and put in place a moratorium until the bigger picture of GMO crops and its impacts on all of us is fleshed out more fully. Truthfully, I feel they are obligated to our community to do so.

I am confident the decision will appear to have been a wise one in retrospect as increasingly, the downsides of GMOs continue to change the landscape of our society in so many ways.

Let's not rush into a permanent, irreversible change without being fully informed on how GMOs may harm us.

Haji Warf farms in Upper Lake.