

## Group proposes new GMO ordinance

Contributed by Elizabeth Larson  
Monday, 07 April 2008  
Last Updated Monday, 07 April 2008

THIS ARTICLE HAS BEEN UPDATED WITH RESPECT TO A HEARING BY THE BOARD OF SUPERVISORS.

LAKE COUNTY &ndash; A new effort has been launched to regulate genetically modified materials &ndash; known more commonly as GMOs &ndash; in Lake County. {sidebar id=64}

The newly drafted proposed ordinance by the Coalition for Responsible Agriculture was expected to go before the Board of Supervisors on April 22. Instead, a discussion on genetically engineered agriculture has been scheduled for 1:35 p.m. on Tuesday, May 6, according to the clerk to the Board of Supervisors. No action is scheduled to take place at that time.

This is the second time such a proposal has been made to county government.

In 2005 the Coalition for Responsible Agriculture &ndash; a group of Lake County farmers, activists and organizations &ndash; led an effort to impose a 30-month moratorium on Roundup Ready alfalfa, which the US Department of Agriculture had deregulated earlier that year.

That original ordinance also required that the location of test plots of GMO materials be revealed by the organization and institutions using them, as Lake County News has reported.

The Board of Supervisors voted down the proposed ordinance in October 2005.

However, since the Board of Supervisors turned down the local ordinance, a federal court case resulted in the re-regulation of Roundup Ready alfalfa last spring.

The ruling prevented plantings of the crop after March 2007 until USDA completes a full environmental impact study, which could take several years to complete. It also imposes a number of other stipulations, including the requirement that Roundup Ready alfalfa be labeled by lots and that any equipment used must be cleaned if slated for use with non-GMO hay.

That action against GMO alfalfa left local activists feeling vindicated, said Sarah Ryan, president of Lake County Healthy Environment and Life (HEAL), one of the Coalition for Responsible Agriculture's member organizations that played an active part in the 2005 ordinance.

She added that the court action taken against GM alfalfa showed that the coalition's concerns about the materials weren't an &ldquo;eco-fantasy.&rdquo;

The coalition has come back with a broader proposal in mind, which won't just seek to regulate alfalfa but all genetically engineered crops.

Ryan notes, however, that not all coalition members who supported the original ordinance support the newest incarnation. The effort is starting anew, seeking new endorsements for its current effort.

Chuck March, executive director of the Lake County Farm Bureau, said the group opposed that 2005 ordinance because the California Farm Bureau is opposed to any localized ordinance on GMOs, believing that they should be controlled at either a state or federal level.

March said GMOs are a &ldquo;tool and an option&rdquo; for growers.

Farm Bureau also is opposed to any type of GMO crop registration for growers, said March. Not only is it extra work, but it also has led to vandalism and protests at farms where the crops are grown.

Attorney Steve Elias, who helped draft the ordinance, said acting now against GMOs is important, because it's early enough to save a GMO-free brand for the county, which will give area farmers a competitive advantage.

The presence of the materials, said Ryan, doesn't just hurt agriculture, but the whole environment.

Ryan, who also serves as Big Valley Rancheria's environmental director, said GMOs require increased pesticide use.

Looking at Lake County's unique and protected geography, Elias said, &ldquo;We truly can say we don't get drift from anywhere.&rdquo;

During a recent trip up to the top of Mt. Konocti, Elias said he got a sense of how isolated the county truly is.

&ldquo;We're just unlike any other county around,&rdquo; he said.

&ldquo;We have a community of people who want to support the farmers here,&rdquo; Elias said, pointing to the county's efforts to promote economic development and agritourism.

With concerns about the environment &ndash; clean water, air and soil &ndash; taking a stand against contamination against GMOs makes sense to coalition members.

Not only would the new ordinance regulate all GMOs, but Elias said it would include stiff penalties for anyone breaking the new rules. Specifically, it calls for a 30-day incarceration period for anyone caught using the materials.

When considering the possible impacts on the environment, what seems like a severe measure is justifiable, Elias explained.

&ldquo;There are so many things that aren't OK about GE crops,&rdquo; he added.

He said breaking the regulations would be an act of &ldquo;eco-terrorism.&rdquo;

&ldquo;We had to explain to the world that we're real serious about this,&rdquo; he said.

There is a concern by coalition members that GMO crops may already have been introduced in some form in the

county.

March said that's his understanding as well, that GMOCrops entered the county in 2006 and 2007. He said he's spoken with local seed distributors who confirmed that, although his request to Monsanto for more information has not been answered.

The University of California Cooperative Extension Office has examined the ordinance, said March. "It's very broad and vague, and could cover even normal hybridization."

Greg Giusti of the local University of Cooperative California Extension Office confirmed that a colleague looked over an earlier draft of the ordinance, in an effort to determine how it could be interpreted on a scientific basis.

"It's our role to try to give objective interpretations of the language," he said.

In the early draft, Giusti said a strict interpretation would prohibit traditional plant breeding.

However, coalition members argue that the proposal enables the Board of Supervisors to approve GMO crops on a one-time basis, and it doesn't cover hybridization.

The California Farm Bureau has been working with groups such as the Center for Food Safety and California Certified Organic Farmers on the state level on Assembly Bill 541, by Assemblyman Jared Huffman.

That bill, which continues to work its way through the state Legislature, is supposed to give farmers added protection from corporate lawsuits if GMO crops are found to have spread to their property.

March said the feeling was that the bill had alleviated concerns about GMOs.

"I guess we're a little bit disappointed that all of this pops up now," he said. "We've been at the table, trying to work on something statewide."

Ryan said coalition members were serious about the ordinance in 2005, and they're serious about it now.

"We're talking about what Lake County is going to be," she said.

E-mail Elizabeth Larson at [el Larson@lakeconews.com](mailto:el Larson@lakeconews.com).

{mos\_sb\_discuss:2}