

Supervisors explore biotech agriculture issues

Contributed by Elizabeth Larson
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LAKEPORT ‐ A Tuesday workshop on genetically engineered agriculture offered the Board of Supervisors a diverse range of opinions on a topic so complex and emotionally charged that even three hours of discussion barely seemed to scratch the surface.

The workshop, scheduled by Board Chair Ed Robey, originally was planned to last two hours. However, it lasted more than three hours as the board heard from agricultural experts, farmers, activists and residents, each with a different perspective on the role biotech should play here in Lake County.

"We're not here to vote on an ordinance," Robey told the large audience. "We're not here to make some kind of final decision."

He recalled an ordinance that came before the board in the fall of 2005 that focused on a temporary moratorium on Roundup Ready alfalfa. The board voted that ordinance down 3-2, with Robey and Supervisor Anthony Farrington voting for it.

A lot has happened since 2005, said Robey. Last year, Roundup Ready alfalfa was hit with a permanent injunction by a federal judge, who re-regulated the crop and ordered that the US Department of Agriculture must complete a full environmental study on it.

Since the 2005 discussion Santa Cruz County accepted its on regulations on biotech crops. Robey said the Santa Cruz ordinance was based on a report by a public health commission subcommittee.

The Coalition for Responsible Agriculture, which had authored the 2005 ordinance proposed for Lake County, had brought back a new one, said Robey. But that particular ordinance wasn't specifically being considered Tuesday.

"I thought it would be wiser to have a discussion in the form of a talk about these things and decide if we wanted to pursue an ordinance or some other process, and that's why we're here today," Robey said.

The board heard from several biotech experts, including Dr. Peggy Lemaux, a University of California Cooperative Extension specialist based at UC Berkeley, who explained how new plant varieties are created or old varieties are changed.

"For a long time we've been modifying crop plants," she said. "Really, everything is genetically modified.” Lemaux, who works with cereal crops, explained that the genetic information in a wheat plant exceeds that found in human DNA ‐ amounting to the equivalent of 1.7 million pages or 1,700 books.

She compared genetic engineering in a plant to cutting and pasting a page out of one part of a document and into another.

"A large percentage of acreage in the US is genetically engineered," said Lemaux., adding that 75 percent of processed foods contain genetically engineered ingredients.

Robey asked Lemaux, and other experts who would testify, if they received money from companies like Monsanto. Lemaux said she took no monies from those companies.

Dr. Kent Bradford of UC Davis's Seed Biotechnology Center said there already is a lot of expertise that can result in crops coexisting without legislation or penalties. US law requires that seeds be properly labeled.

In response to Robey's question about funding, Bradford said the center receive funding from all seed companies through an advisory board.

Robert Leavitt of the California Department of Food and Agriculture explained his part in working with a US Department of Agriculture pilot program that involved states in biotech field testing trials.

Leavitt said he and other CDFA staffers have been trained and have taken part in inspecting those field trials, which must be permitted.

Biotech crops have been on the landscape for more than 20 years, said Leavitt.

Community members offer differing viewpoints

Much of the afternoon was taken up with public testimony offered by people from all parts of the spectrum.

Sarah Ryan of the Coalition for Responsible Agriculture read a list of decisions and reports that documented concerns about biotech crops, regulatory oversight and impacts on the environment ‐ including more pesticide use.

"Genetically engineered agriculture's track record speaks for itself," said Ryan.

Even with controls in place, biotech crops can't really be controlled, Ryan said. That's given rise to groups like the Wine Institute, National Farmers Union, California Rice Commission and American Rice Federation adopted stances against genetically engineered crops.

Supervisor Rob Brown asked Ryan if any crops grown locally ‐ such as pears or winegrapes ‐ were at risk due to the introduction of biotech. Ryan said there already had been a small acreage of biotech corn brought here, but there were no biotech versions of the area's major crops. Brown said he wanted to know if any farmers had been directly hurt by biotech traits.

Broc Zoller, who grows winegrapes, pears and walnuts, told the board, "I don't know why we need an ordinance, to be honest with you."

Genetic engineering of crops offers answers to resource scarcity, said Zoller, including crops that are drought-resistant and use less nitrogen. "Why are we going to deny ourselves this progress?"

Paul Frey of Frey Vineyards in Mendocino County said his family-owned winery buys grapes from local growers. He pointed to concerns over genetically modified yeasts that are now being used in winemaking and possibly contaminate neighboring wineries and winegrapes.

Monte Black, a small micro-organic grape grower in Konocti Bay, said if his crops are contaminated by traces of biotech crops, he could lose his contracts. Black suggested the county may start to see many smaller growers, and more grain crops could be introduced, which would be susceptible to biotech versions.

Middletown winegrape grower Dave Rosenthal asserted a biotech ban – which he saw as a moral issue – wouldn't help the county. Rosenthal said he could see biotech benefiting winegrapes by making them resistant to Pierce's disease, which can devastate grapes.

Anderson Valley organic farmer Doug Mosel coordinated Mendocino County's successful campaign to pass a voter-approved initiative to become a GE-free zone in 2004. He said the scientists who spoke earlier in the meeting may have left people with the impression that biotech crops are benign.

However, US regulatory agencies depend on companies that hold patents to provide research on the crops, with records about the crops or the field test sites not open to the public, so it's hard to know just how damaging the crops could be, said Mosel.

"The opportunity you have is to preserve the agricultural integrity in this county," he said.

Brown asked him about an economic study on the benefit to Mendocino County of being a GE-free zone. Mosel said he didn't believe such a study had been done.

Michelle Scully said the discussion seemed to have at its core the "glaring assumption" that conventional agriculture supported mutant plant strains, when the truth is they were hardworking people trying to produce good crops. She suggested a more collaborative approach.

"I don't like the divisiveness of this," said Scully, suggesting it didn't represent the community well.

Following a 40-minute break to allow for another agenda item to be heard, the hearing resumed, with Sierra Club Lake Group Chair Victoria Brandon focused on a topic she didn't feel had been considered – that of unintended consequences.

Biotech crops that target certain insects actually can hurt beneficial insects as well, she said.

She pointed to the example of corn that is tolerant to the organic compound *Bacillus thuringiensis*. The pollen blows around and hits other plants like milkweed, which is fed on by monarch butterflies.

The result, she said, has been a butterfly die-off. "Nobody wanted that. Nobody intended that."

Lake County Farm Bureau Executive Director Chuck March told the supervisors that his board of directors had opposed the 2005 ordinance, and remained steadfast in opposing any local biotech regulations.

March said regulations should be consistent at all levels of government.

He argued that Lake County growers could be placed in a competitive disadvantage if a biotech ordinance was passed. March added that 12 million farmers in 23 countries around the world currently grow nearly 300 million acres of biotech crops. He said the crops can help save water and air quality.

Coexistence among conventional and biotech crops is dependent upon planning and communication with neighbors, he said.

The Lake County Farm Bureau, he added, was not promoting the use of genetically engineered products, but merely asking that they remain on a level playing field.

He quoted a letter Agriculture Commissioner Steve Hajik sent to Robey voice his concerns over enforcement of an anti-GE ordinance.

March asked the board to endorse AB 541, a bill working its way through the state legislature which offers farmers protections against liability in cases where biotech crops spread to their acreage.

Steve Elias, who helped draft the Coalition for Responsible Agriculture's proposed ordinance, asked the board to adopt an ordinance in order to give Lake County a GE-free brand.

"You can have that now, but you can't have it later," he said. "Once it's in here, it's in here for good."

Board largely split on issue

Supervisor Denise Rushing said the biotech issue, which arose in 2005, was a key reason for her running for office. She said she believed erring on the side of caution was important.

Rushing, who has a science background, said she's familiar with how technology companies can behave, and said they can't be expected to self-regulate when huge profits are at stake.

"I believe we're truly at risk in society with the mass-produced food system," which has resulted in loss of biodiversity and self-determination, said Rushing.

She supported having the board consider an ordinance to regulate biotech.

Brown, however, said he didn't share her concerns.

Bigger issues for farming, he said, were economics that made a pear produced in Chile cheaper to buy in a local supermarket than locally produced pears.

Supervisor Jeff Smith said he found the discussion valuable and educational, but added that he didn't believe an ordinance against biotech crops was the right thing to do.

"To me the jury's really still out as to what we should do on this," he said.

Noting that the Tuesday discussion was more congenial than those in 2005, Farrington said he was open to further dialog and gathering more information.

Robey agreed. "This discussion isn't over."

The board did agree to take action on one item – a suggestion by Brown to send the legislature a letter supporting AB 541.

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