

New ordinance to control GE crops goes to supervisors

Contributed by Elizabeth Larson
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LAKE COUNTY — Another proposed ordinance that would control the use of genetically engineered — or GE — crops in Lake County will be considered by the Board of Supervisors later this month.

The new GE ordinance is tentatively scheduled to go before the board at 11 a.m. Tuesday, Oct. 21. The discussion has been rescheduled a few times since it was first placed on the agenda in early October.

Board Chair Ed Robey is taking the proposal to the board. He said it's based on an ordinance that was accepted by the Santa Cruz County Board of Supervisors in June of 2006.

The biggest difference between the original Santa Cruz ordinance and what Robey is proposing is a provision he's included that allows the Board of Supervisors to grant exceptions to the prohibition against GE crops.

The board, he said, could make a finding that a product meets eight criteria that ensures it isn't going to harm the economy or agriculture.

He used as an example one possibility raised in a May public workshop on genetically engineered agriculture. During that discussion, Dave Rosenthal of Middletown talked about the benefits genetic engineering would have if it could lead to a grape plant that is resistant to Pierce's disease.

Robey said such a genetically engineered crop's benefits would outweigh its negatives, because it would mean pesticide wouldn't have to be sprayed.

At that same May workshop, Robey had samples ordinances from other counties, and also asked scientists and agricultural experts to speak about the crops. Robey said the workshop was meant to be a forum for all arguments — pro and con — to be aired.

Local proponents of keeping GE crops out of Lake County say it could offer a branding opportunity for local agriculture. On the reverse, at the May workshop Supervisor Rob Brown said it was his understanding that in Mendocino County — where a GE moratorium is in effect — crops were not getting higher prices for farmers.

The May workshop featured a sharp division between those advocating for genetic engineering as a beneficial tool for agriculture and those that consider it a major threat to organic agriculture and to the environment.

The Oct. 21 hearing, said Robey, won't be an opportunity to reiterate all of those past issues. "I'm not going to allow it to turn into a rehash of every argument under the sun."

He added, "The board's got plenty of background information. I think they're thoroughly informed."

Earlier this year, the Coalition for Responsible Agriculture had taken a new GE ordinance to the county. The same group had sought to have an ordinance passed in 2005 to prohibit the use of Roundup Ready alfalfa for a 30-month period.

However, the effort failed when Supervisors Gary Lewis, Jeff Smith and Rob Brown voted against it that October. Robey and Supervisor Anthony Farrington supported the measure.

In 2007, a federal court re-regulated Roundup Ready alfalfa after a judge found the US Department of Agriculture, which didn't conduct an environmental impact study on the crop, had failed to address concerns that GE alfalfa could contaminate conventional and organic alfalfa. A nationwide planting injunction also was put in place until a study is conducted.

Concerns about GE crops contaminating other crops have arisen based on actual occurrences. The crops have been known to escape test plots and travel many miles, mixing with conventional crops and wild plants.

Such was the case in the southern US in 2006 and 2007, when a type of GE rice was found to have contaminated commercial long-grain rice.

The result was an embargo by the European Union on all US-grown rice — including varieties from California, where no GE rice is grown.

Victoria Brandon, chair of the Sierra Club Lake Group — which is a member group in the Coalition for Responsible Agriculture — indicated her group's support of Robey's proposed ordinance.

The Lake County Farm Bureau hasn't changed its position opposing any such effort to control genetically engineered crops, said Executive Director Chuck March.

In May, about the time of the supervisors' workshop, the local Farm Bureau Board of Directors voted to oppose any local regulation on GE crops, a move which reaffirmed its previous position, said March. The vote was 14 to three.

March said there has been a long discussion about the local Farm Bureau needing to follow the state organization's policy of opposing local regulation. That policy has been created out of concern that a patchwork system of regulation could occur from county to county.

However, March said local Farm Bureaus can opt out of following that state policy if they choose.

The local discussion about GE crops follows Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger's signing last month of AB 541, by Assemblyman Jared Huffman (D-San Rafael).

The legislation, signed Sept. 27, was drafted to protect farmers against having their crops cross-contaminated by GE crops, and also guard them against lawsuits from big agritech companies that might try to sue for patent infringement if materials escape.

Huffman's bill was endorsed both by the state Farm Bureau and Sierra Club, as well as the Board of Supervisors, which sent a letter to the state Legislature supporting the bill.

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