

## Board focuses on forming GE advisory committee

Contributed by Elizabeth Larson  
 Thursday, 20 November 2008  
 Last Updated Thursday, 20 November 2008

LAKEPORT — The Board of Supervisors on Tuesday directed that an advisory committee be formed to find a middle ground on the issue of genetically engineered (GE) in Lake County.

During the hearing, which ran about a half hour, the board once more heard input both from those who favored a ban and those who oppose it, but the focus of the discussion was on the committee and how it could be formed to ensure that the different sides hear each other.

On Oct. 21, the board voted 3-2 to initially approve a ban of GE crops in Lake County. However, on Nov. 4, they delayed approving the ordinance on a second hearing due to concerns about conflicts with the state's right to farm ordinance, among other things.

For the Tuesday meeting, three versions of the ordinance — including that which had originally been approved — were offered.

However, before the board could consider them, Board Chair Ed Robey, who brought the ordinance to the board, began the discussion by withdrawing the ordinance altogether.

Instead, he asked the board to go ahead and consider forming the advisory committee.

“I think it would be much better at this point if we just gave a committee a chance to try to come up with a — some sort of an ordinance that addresses this issue that we could all live with,” he said.

He quoted a letter sent to the board from Toni Scully, whose family owns the pear packing house Scully Packing. Scully told the board it would be wrong to pass the ordinance before giving the working group a chance to work.

Robey said the issue was a bit of *deja vu* for him. Five years ago, when the GE issue manifested locally, the board asked a committee to look at it and come up with a solution.

“I believe that the committee basically reached a compromise except for one word, basically — they were that close,” he said.

Supervisor Anthony Farrington said that, like Robey, he agreed with the thrust of Scully's letter. However, he had issues with some of Scully's sentiments, which suggested the board was “placating” certain groups by initially accepting the ordinance.

Farrington said placation doesn't come into it. “For me, from day one, it's about bringing these two sides together for a dialog that has been nonexistent.”

And dialog has resulted from the ban's proposal, with the opportunity for continued discussion, he said.

Farrington said there also is still the option that either pro- or anti-GE forces could put the matter on the ballot.

Scully's letter also had stated, “It's insulting that you discredit governmental protection agencies.”

Farrington said it's the board's responsibility to question superior powers; if they don't, they're not doing their job.

The letter also had said Scully was dismayed by the board's seemingly enthusiastic support of stances approved by “anti-establishment” groups like the Center for Food Safety.

To that, Farrington responded he was required to look at both sides — not just one.

Supervisor Denise Rushing said she also had concerns about the letter, although she agreed with its general thrust.

“I wonder if common ground can be found if either side can't hear the underlying concerns,” she said.

She said she believed the board had heard from both sides during the process of discussing the ban that local regulation was appropriate if the crops weren't regulated by the state and federal governments.

“I, for one, would like to not see these genetically engineered organisms in our county unless they have been fully tested,” she said.

In the Bay Area, a local foods movement is forming with people who want to buy food produced within 100 miles. “We happen to be within that 100-mile radius,” she said, asking how the county can capture that opportunity.

Sierra Club Lake Group Chair Victoria Brandon said she came to the meeting charged by her executive committee to make a request that the board withdraw the ban options until they could be considered more closely.

In the mean time, Brandon suggested the advisory committee should include members from all segments of the community. Brandon proposed that Debra Sommerfield, the deputy administrator for the county's Economic Development Department, should be included in the process, since it could have “immense” implications for marketing the county.

“I think we've got an opportunity here to exchange views and discover what peoples' concerns really are,” Brandon said.

The issue, she added, isn't going to go away just because a ban isn't being actively considered.

She also suggested formal facilitation to avoid confrontation, with a neutral person leading the initial sessions.

“Like a monk?” joked Farrington.

Supervisor Rob Brown suggested Sommerfield could fulfill that facilitation role.

“I'd really like to do it myself,” joked county Chief Administrative Office Kelly Cox.

“That's as close to a monk as we could get,” Brown quipped.

Sarah Ryan, a founding member of the Coalition for Responsible Agriculture, questioned if the various sides have equal access to the board.

“I'm impressed we can send letters and they get addressed and looked at,” she said, referring to Scully's

missive.

Ryan, on the other hand, said she had called and e-mailed the supervisor for the area she lives, Jeff Smith, but received no response. "I don't know if we all have equal access."

She asked if the board would consider directing the agricultural commissioner to track plantings of GE crops from this point forward.

Ryan also asked if the board would create a time frame for the advisory committee to accomplish its work.

Farrington suggested Rushing and Brown — who have been on the pro- and anti- sides of the ban, respectively — also serve on the advisory committee, a suggestion which gained two thumbs up from Robey. "I think that it's a balance," Farrington said.

He agreed that a first task should be establishing a time line.

Responding to Ryan's criticism about his not returning calls, Smith said he doesn't reply to inquiries in the middle of public discussions, because once a matter goes to the board he believes all conversations should be public.

"That's why I don't respond when we have something hot on the table."

"He's been like this for years," said Robey.

Brown suggested he and Rushing meet this week with Sommerfield on the criteria for committee membership and structure, and then bring it back next Tuesday.

Robey suggested the board ask the committee to give a progress report within a month of its formation.

Smith suggested the Sierra Club, Farm Bureau, the chambers and the Lake County Winegrape Commission be among those with representatives on the committee.

JoAnn Saccato of the Lake County Community Co-op, citing concerns about cross-contamination from GE crops, asked if a nonbinding "gentleman's" agreement to prevent GE crops from being planted for six to 12 months could be arrived at to protect farmers who don't want their crops impacted.

"Once it comes in, your window of opportunity is closed to have a GE-free county," said Saccato.

Robey questioned how such an agreement could be made to work.

Michelle Scully, who throughout the public debate has been one to point to the need for middle ground and compromise in exchange for division, said she's a big believer in "win-win" solutions.

Scully suggested the board would have a difficult task in choosing members for the committee. However, she added, "There's polarized sides, but I believe here's a great big center."

The polarization over the GE ban "has been a painful thing to watch, and I don't think it's serving any of us well at this point," she said, adding that the board was like Solomon cutting the baby in half — and they needed to be careful how they cut the baby.

She said property rights and the public's general impression of farming were big concerns for her. Agriculture is "a gift to this county — how can we lift that up and facilitate it?"

Robey said he believed the property rights issue is a red herring. "I think it's more that people, especially farmers, just don't like being regulated, and I'll give you an example."

He referred to the use of DDT, which once was legal but now is banned. "Is that taking away a property right?"

"Ed, are you teasing me?" Scully responded.

Robey replied that he wasn't, and he compared DDT as a tool with GE crops, a tool local farmers have said would be taken away if the ban was put in effect.

"You're not going to be on the committee, right?" Scully replied.

She said DDT always is thrown out by GE opponents, and she said she could respond that people also used to not be vaccinated for polio, so she said Robey's argument also was a red herring.

Finley farmer Phil Murphy said an advisory board working in Monterey County on GE-related issues is now in its third year, and hasn't been able to work out an agreement with their Farm Bureau.

"Because they didn't have a time line for it, it's just dragging on endlessly," he said.

Murphy said he would like to see the advisory committee's work completed by mid-April, before the next planting season.

He said he had gone to the Lake County Farm Bureau with the GE ban proposal earlier this year, before approaching the Board of Supervisors. "I asked them if they wanted to sit down with us and look at it and see if there was things they wanted to change or improve or talk about," but he was "turned down flat" due to a Farm Bureau policy not to negotiate the issue.

Murphy suggested that before the Lake County Farm Bureau is included on the committee, they need to rescind their policy.

"I've heard it said many, many times here that this is a divisive issue in the local farming community, and honestly, I've never seen it that way," said Murphy, noting he's seen the same divisions since he got into farming 15 years ago.

While some people believe strongly what comes from the corporate community and the University of California system, other people — himself included — tend to question information, said Murphy.

"I think the batting average of the skeptics is better than the people that just put blind faith in 100 percent of what they're told."

More specifics about the advisory board will be presented at the board meeting next week.

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

{mos\_sb\_discuss:2}