

Guidelines for GE crop committee set; county seeks members

Contributed by Elizabeth Larson
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LAKEPORT — The Board of Supervisors this week unanimously approved guidelines for a committee to discuss the issue of how to deal with genetically engineered (GE) crops in Lake County.

Supervisors Rob Brown and Denise Rushing, and Debra Sommerfield of the county's marketing department were directed at the Nov. 18 board meeting to work on the composition of the Genetically Engineered Crops Advisory Committee.

On Tuesday they brought their recommendations to the board, including a proposal that the committee include 13 voting members, the same number that served on the agriculture element committee for the general plan, said Brown.

Members would represent the following: conventional farming (two), organic farming (two), environment (two), science (two), agriculture support/services (two), business (one) and members at-large (two).

In addition, Brown, Rushing and Sommerfield would participate as nonvoting advisory members.

The county begins to plan advertising immediately for applicants to participate. "We're encouraging those who are interested in this process to apply," said Rushing.

The main criteria for voting members, said Rushing, is to be willing to participate fully and listen to what the other side has to say.

Brown said he, Rushing and Sommerfield decided against recommending a timeline for the committee's performance. Instead, they suggested having the committee meet first and devise its own timeline for action, which then can be brought back to the board.

He said he's been surprised by the people who already have expressed interest in being on the committee — some of them haven't been part of the ongoing discussion over the last month or so regarding the GE issue.

Because the discussion thus far has been a heated one at times, Supervisor Jeff Smith suggested that if any committee members become unruly or disruptive, that they should be removed and replaced by an alternate to keep the group moving forward.

Rushing said committee members can express strong opinions, but if they resort to personal attacks, that's a different matter.

Brown said the committee's first meeting will take place after the start of the new year, in the first part of January.

Finley organic farmer Phil Murphy, who has supported preventing GE crops being grown locally in order to offer local farmers another marketing tool, spoke to the board about an e-mail sent by the Lake County Farm Bureau.

The e-mail suggested that Agricultural Commissioner Steve Hajik and Greg Giusti, director of Lake County's University of California Cooperative Extension Office, be added to the committee in nonvoting, advisory roles.

Murphy was concerned about that proposal, saying Hajik already has expressed bias on the issue — in this case, he's against regulating GE crops — and, according to Murphy, has "personal animosity" toward some of the people who have tried to get a GE crop ban passed locally.

"I think that also should be taken into consideration too," said Murphy, adding that it's fact, not speculation.

Murphy said Giusti also is "extremely biased," and has authored one paper and co-authored another against any sort of GE regulation.

"His usefulness as an advisory member is extremely limited," said Murphy.

Brown asked if anyone who has expressed an opinion should be prevented from being on the committee.

Murphy replied that they can get people who don't have a bias. He said they could bring in someone from Monsanto, a large corporation associated with many GE crops, and they would have the same opinion as Giusti.

"Your approach is if they don't agree with you we shouldn't have them," said Brown.

Murphy denied that. "Let's take a look at a couple of other people, that's all I'm saying, Rob."

Brown asked for names of people Murphy would suggest, and Murphy in turn suggested University of California Cooperative Extension Farm Advisory Rachel Elkins.

"It's that simple," said Murphy.

"It's not that simple," said Brown, who added that Murphy has "a clear angst" toward a lot of people involved in the process.

Rushing said she felt that Murphy's request was reasonable.

Murphy added that he's not trying to pass himself off as an unbiased person in the matter.

Board Chair Ed Robey — who wrote a GE ban ordinance that was accepted Oct. 21 in a 3-2 vote but which, after a postponed second reading, he withdrew last week — said he had modeled his ordinance on one accepted in Santa Cruz County. An important difference in his version of the ordinance was that he made the agricultural commissioner, not the county's top health official, the enforcing officer.

At the time, said Robey, he didn't know of Hajik's bias against such an ordinance.

Lake County Farm Bureau Executive Director Chuck March said it was because of that proposed regulatory role that they suggested Hajik have an advisory role. Giusti, similarly, was suggested because of his important role in the University of California's local agriculture program.

Before she moved that the board approve the committee's composition, Rushing said it would be preferable to pick people for advisory roles who are unbiased and who people on both sides of the issue can agree on.

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