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Both sides regroup after GMO-ban failure

Vickie Horner
Freelance Writer

Sonoma County voters' recent rejection of a genetically-engineered crop ban leaves many involved on both sides of the issue asking the same question: What's next?

Had it passed, Sonoma's Measure M would have banned genetically modified organisms for crops and livestock in the county for 10 years. But on Nov. 8 county voters rejected the initiative, 55 to 44 percent.

GMOs are altered by biotechnology researchers to withstand plant diseases, pests or herbicides, or to increase nutritional value.

Proponents of the initiative, including hundreds of volunteers, are meeting Nov. 18 to discuss how they want to move forward, said GE-Free Sonoma County Campaign Coordinator Daniel Solnit in a phone interview Nov. 14.

At press time the group's post-election direction is unclear, but "people are very, very committed to this issue," Solnit said.

A Sonoma County GMO ban would mainly be preventive since only a few dairy farmers in the county plant GMO corn, he said. The group hopes the community eventually reaches a larger GE-free stance.

He said it would be preferable to regulate GMOs at the state level, but anti-GMO advocates have been "forced" to propose bans at the county level because state and federal regulators aren't doing an adequate job.

The "preemption" bills passed in 14 states are "profoundly undemocratic" and usurp the rights of counties and cities, Solnit said.

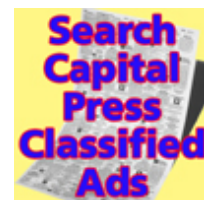
As of July, 14 states — Indiana, Ohio, Pennsylvania, West Virginia, Idaho, Arizona, North Dakota, South Dakota, Iowa, Kansas, Oklahoma, Texas, Florida and Georgia — have passed laws that preempt their cities and counties from banning the sale of GMO seeds, according to the Organic Consumers Association website (www.organicconsumers.org/ge-free.htm).

"I think the biggest priority is to stop the preemption bills and overturn the ones in place," said Ryan Zinn the Organic Consumers Association's national campaign coordinator in San Francisco.

Maintaining an open debate with constituents on all sides of the table is the bottom line, Zinn said in a phone interview. Consumers of organic products want an untainted food supply and GMOs are a threat to the organic industry, he said.

Foreign markets want GMO free crops, Zinn said. "I think farmers and processors need to take a really hard look at what the foreign markets are demanding."

The California Healthy Foods Coalition, a farmer led public education program that promotes



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agricultural innovation and biotechnology, remains dedicated to its mission of education, said spokesman Marko Mlikotin.

The rejection of Sonoma's proposed GMO ban took place in a "very liberal county" that is in the backyard of the state's anti-genetic engineering movement, Mlikotin said, which he claims is a major step back for the GE-free movement in California and nationwide because national agricultural groups are following what happens here.

Although it is sponsored by the Occidental Arts and Ecology center that largely funded the GE-Free Sonoma County Campaign, Californians for GE-Free Agriculture is a statewide education group that doesn't fund campaigns, said spokeswoman Renata Brillinger in a phone interview from her Occidental office.

"We know that the more people learn about (genetic engineering) the more they are opposed to it," Brillinger said.

In the absence of statewide regulation Californians for GE-Free Agriculture plans to make sure GMO decisions made on the local level are protected, she said.

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