

The Sacramento Bee

THURSDAY November 4, 2004

www.sacbee.com

Final edition 50 cents

Biotech tide turns – Three defeats undercut ban momentum

By Mike Lee

November 4, 2004

CHICO – California farmers woke up Wednesday to a possible high-tech future – and more battles ahead over genetically engineered crops.

Voters in Butte, San Luis Obispo and Humboldt counties rejected bans on biotech crops, a serious setback for a national movement that wants to stop genetic engineering over safety and social concerns. Only Marin County adopted a ban in Tuesday's election.

"It's a good day for Butte County," said Gridley rice farmer Doug Rudd. "We knew that if they could pass it here, it was going to go right on down the state."

Butte voters rejected the Measure D ban 61 percent to 39 percent. The race was slightly closer in San Luis Obispo County, where Measure Q was defeated 59 percent to 41 percent.

In Humboldt County, where supporters pulled back after questions were raised about the legality of the ballot language, Measure M was rejected 65 percent to 35 percent. Marin County voters approved the biotech ban by a margin of 61 percent to 39 percent.

The results send a strong signal across the nation that voters in high-production farm counties aren't willing to reject the controversial technology.

"(Tuesday's results) certainly suggest that ag biotechnology is not really threatened in the United States," said Gregory Conko, director of food safety policy at the Competitive Enterprise Institute, a Libertarian-leaning think tank in Washington, D.C.

Voting followed a typical pattern, said Conko. The county with the heaviest urban influence voted against biotechnology, while counties where farmers depend heavily on innovation supported biotechnology.

"The results kind of look like what you would expect if you performed this experiment nationwide," he said.

Ahead for California are more proposed bans, likely with more moderate language than the first wave. For instance, they might offer sunset clauses to soften the finality of a moratorium. Some Butte farmers said they might support that idea.

"The counties that are organizing across California are not going to be at all deterred," said Renata Brillinger, director of Californians for GE-Free Agriculture, which is helping coordinate anti-biotech efforts statewide. "I don't think it will change the momentum."

Michael Rodemeyer, executive director of the Pew Initiative on

Food and Biotechnology in Washington, D.C., said the election likely will take some steam out of the anti-biotech movement, which rushed forward with proposed bans after Mendocino County voters set a national precedent with a ban in March.

"It may be that they need to take a slower approach or a more targeted approach," he said.

Using biotechnology, scientists can cut and paste DNA in ways not possible in nature. They can engineer plants to withstand weedkillers or to grow medicinal compounds. Proponents say genetic engineering reduces reliance on toxic chemicals and makes farming easier.

Opponents fear the potential unintended environmental and human health consequences of altering genetic codes. Anti-biotech forces have successfully slowed the spread of the products in Europe and Asia, but U.S. government officials and mainstream farm leaders embrace biotechnology as a way to stay competitive.

No one expects the anti-biotech forces to fold. Activists in roughly a dozen California counties are considering anti-biotech ballot measures, with Sonoma and Santa Barbara among the farthest along. Even in Butte, one campaign coordinator promised to try again for a ban next year.

Brillinger is speaking next week to a gathering of the national Genetic Engineering Action Network in Colorado, where she'll analyze the California movement for those hoping to duplicate it elsewhere. There are grass-roots movements in Oregon, Vermont, Colorado and Hawaii.

Brillinger will focus on how the California Farm Bureau Federation, the California Cattlemen's Association and others rallied support in the two main farming counties. Biotech companies spent \$600,000 in a failed effort to prevent the earlier ban in Mendocino County, but the vast majority of money spent before Tuesday's election was donated by in-state farmers and farm groups.

An unusual joint effort by Butte farm interests raised approximately \$190,000 for the No on D campaign - more than three times the money collected by Measure D supporters. It was one of the most expensive ballot measures in recent county history.

The Organic Consumers Association in San Francisco was one of the major financial contributors to the ban campaign in Butte. Spokesman Ryan Zinn said he is laying the groundwork for state legislation that would make biotech farmers or companies liable if genes from their crop contaminate organic crops.

"County measures still are relevant, but they form part of a bigger strategy statewide in California," he said.

Beyond protections for organic farmers, there's likely to be a push for legislation that clarifies California's approach to biotech crops and supersedes the county-by-county policy patchwork. Like almost every other state, California defers to a complex and incomplete set of federal rules on biotech crops.

"It raises the question of at what point does the state itself step in and deal with some of the issues," said Rodemeyer at Pew.