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Ballot fight targets biotech crops

As sides square off in Sonoma, others want to outlaw bans by counties.

By Jim Wasserman -- Bee Staff Writer

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Saying their livelihoods are threatened, powerful forces that drive California's \$27 billion agricultural economy are mobilizing to defeat a November ballot initiative to ban biotech crops in Sonoma County, and possibly even prohibit such county bans with new legislation in coming days.

Farm interests in Sonoma County say they've already raised \$200,000 to fight a local ballot measure promoting a 10-year moratorium on growing genetically modified crops. Statewide, the California Farm Bureau Federation, California Cattlemen's Association and others have launched a political organizing effort, campaign Web site and fundraising operation to confront anti-biotech groups at the polls Nov. 8 and into next year when more counties consider such bans.

"The whole world is watching what is going on here," said Sonoma County Farm Bureau Executive Director Lex McCorvey. "This will put our farmers and ranchers at a competitive disadvantage," he said, noting that some already grow biotech corn for cattle feed.

If passed, the major wine-grape growing and dairy county would become California's fourth to ban genetically engineered seeds. In 2004, Mendocino, Marin and Trinity counties became the nation's first to ban the growing of such seeds, despite having few, if any, biotech crops. Voters in Butte, San Luis Obispo and Humboldt counties rejected their proposed bans. The Humboldt County town of Arcata and tiny Point Arena in Mendocino County have also banned growing of biotech crops inside their city limits, while elected officials in nine counties have passed resolutions supporting biotech.

Opponents of genetically modified agricultural crops, which were first commercialized in 1996, say their long-term effects on the food supply, public health and the environment haven't been adequately studied, and frequently link them to an industrial-style agriculture system they say produces food with harmful environmental practices. According to the Washington-based Council for Biotechnology Information, biotech seeds were planted last year on 200 million acres in 17 nations.

"Once it's out there you can't recall it," said Daniel Solnit, campaign coordinator for GE-Free Sonoma County, the group that qualified the ballot measure with 45,000 voter signatures this year. "This is not like a defective product you take back. It's not like chemical contamination. This is biological contamination that lasts forever."

Genetically modified crops represent one of the biggest advances in the 10,000-year history of agriculture, biotech supporters say, with potential to greatly increase yields and defend plants from pests and diseases. Scientists create the seeds by splicing new materials into their genetic codes, a now routine laboratory practice that some fear may eventually lead to unintended environmental consequences.

"The insertion of foreign genes into a species is when the problems arise," said Renata Brillinger, director of Sonoma County-based Californians for GE-Free Agriculture.

California has an estimated 600,000 acres of biotech crops, mostly cotton and corn and largely in the Central Valley.

While many farmers say such crops cut their fuel and chemical costs, and require fewer tractor trips across their fields every year, biotech opponents are preparing to initiate battles to restrict the crops beyond Sonoma County to at least a dozen other counties next year, including Sacramento, Yolo, Placer and Nevada.

Already, prospects of such county bans spreading beyond California have prompted a dozen state legislatures to outlaw them, and California will soon become the 13th, if state Sen. Dean Florez, a Shafter Democrat, gets his way.

"We think that debate belongs in the state," Florez said. The senator, who represents parts of Kern, Tulare and Fresno counties, is seeking a special Assembly Agriculture Committee hearing this week on legislation he said could stop Sonoma County's vote.

With time short, Florez is planning a controversial, but common parliamentary procedure known inside the Capitol as a "gut and amend," stripping one of his air pollution bills of its language and inserting new language outlawing county bans on

biotech seeds.

That's prompted a massive rallying effort by anti-biotech forces, who call the senator's move a last-minute "dark room" deal to subvert local democracy in California.

"I agree in principle that regulating at the state level is more consistent," Solnit said. "But guess what? They aren't doing it. They've had 12 years. They aren't on the ball, and they're showing no sign of doing it."

Solnit and other biotech foes say lack of sufficient federal and state oversight of genetic engineering has forced them to make it a local issue.

But Yolo County rice farmer Tim Miramontes, who planted his first biotech crop this year, 15 acres of herbicide-resistant canola for a European seed company, said his positive experience proved to him that county bans are shortsighted.

A biotech crop "helps the farming community by keeping our costs down," he said. "It saves more on pesticides and herbicides, which people don't want us to spray anyway."

In the meantime, battle lines are already hardening in Sonoma County, where the pro-biotech coalition recently ran a half-page advertisement in the Santa Rosa Press Democrat. In the ad, a letter from Bill Pauli, a Mendocino County vineyard and winery owner, and president of the Sacramento-based California Farm Bureau Federation, urged voters to be wary of "scare tactics" and an outsider-financed "campaign of fear and misinformation."

Responded Ryan Zinn, a San Francisco campaign coordinator with the Minnesota-based Organic Consumers Association, which contributed to previous county biotech campaigns: "It's really disingenuous to say this is outsiders causing problems. In all these counties we have more members than the Farm Bureau does."

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