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Ag Advisory Committee considers GMOs

Citizens' group wants a law to ban genetically engineered crops.

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By Zachary Stahl



Lorna Moffat (front) wants a countywide ban on genetically modified crops.

Several years ago seed giant Monsanto offered Salinas Valley growers a genetic solution to their weed problem with spring mix. Monsanto was developing a lettuce variety resistant to Roundup, the company's leading herbicide. Farmers could have killed weeds with

Roundup without harming the genetically engineered spring mix. But the industry shied away.

"It was dropped very quickly," says Jim Manassero, chairman of the Monterey County Agricultural Advisory Committee. "Number one, the industry didn't want it." Manassero says a state law would have had to change to allow the vegetables to be harvested after being doused with Roundup. Plus, consumers would have balked at the prospect.

"It becomes very easy for that type of science to get blown out of proportion by the media and to make it all lettuce is poisoned or could be," Manassero says.

The genetically modified seeds never reached the valley floor. While Monsanto has taken over the corn and soybean seed market, Monterey County ag officials maintain that no genetically engineered crops have been grown in the county. Some local organic farmers and environmentalists want to keep it this way.

On Feb. 28 a group of small farmers and Monterey Peninsula residents asked the Agricultural Advisory Committee to recommend a county ban on GE crops. Lorna Moffat, who is spearheading the effort, proposed the moratorium in response to a November speech by Dr. Henry Daniell of the University of Florida about producing insulin from genetically modified lettuce.

Moffat told the committee that federal agencies do a poor job monitoring GE crops, and no long-term studies have been done to monitor their health impacts. "Few regulations to protect public health and our environment are in place," Moffat said, warning that GE crops could cross-pollinate other produce.

Alex Sancen is an organic farmer who grows on less than five acres at the Agricultural & Land-Based Training Association outside Salinas. Sancen told the committee that his farmers market customers are concerned about GE crops tainting their produce. "They are speaking of buying vegetables from Santa Cruz County if you guys don't do anything," Sancen said.

Sancen and dozens of other ALBA farmers want the Monterey County Board of Supervisors to adopt an

ordinance similar to one that exists in Santa Cruz County. In 2006 Santa Cruz supervisors banned growing genetically engineered crops. The county code makes exemptions for GE pharmaceuticals grown in state or federally licensed, indoor labs.

Santa Cruz is the most recent California county to prohibit GM crops. In 2004, Mendocino County became the first in the U.S. to ban GMOs, followed by Trinity and Marin counties. While a handful of liberal, coastal counties have outlawed the crops, anti-GMO ballot initiatives in Butte, Humboldt, San Luis Obispo and Sonoma counties have failed at the polls.

In addition, at least 12 counties, mostly in the conservative and agriculturally-rich Central Valley, have passed resolutions supporting ag biotechnology.

The only related thing that Monterey County has on the books is a code regulating the experimental release of GE microorganisms. The county crafted the code in the '70s in response to a bacteria intended to prevent frost on strawberries, says Bob Roach, assistant agricultural commissioner.

Pesticide-resistant crops, GE plants and pharmaceuticals fall under the purview of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, Department of Agriculture and Food and Drug Administration, respectively, Roach says. County ordinances "are largely symbolic because no one really wanted to grow these crops in these counties," he adds.

The same goes for Monterey County. "I don't think they are on our door step," Roach says. "I don't think they are even coming up the walk yet."

But Salinas Mayor Dennis Donohue and some ag officials want to leave the door open for GE research. Donohue hopes to usher in higher-paying jobs by attracting pharmaceutical, biotechnology and alternative energy firms. He says he will oppose any regulations restricting biotechnology. "The reality is our scientists want to be free to do business," he says.

Donohue says just because Daniell spoke in Salinas about insulin-producing lettuce doesn't mean that research is moving forward. "This is all speculative," he says. "He gave a speech. Nobody is making plans. Nobody is advocating GMO crops."

Manassero says the Ag Advisory Committee will schedule a presentation from a UC Davis professor about the benefits of genetic engineering. The committee will then recommend a course of action to county supervisors. But it's clear the committee chairman doesn't think a ban is necessary.

"Why pass an ordinance that would close a potential scientific and high-tech solution to a problem that we don't know about yet?" Manassero asks.

Manassero dismisses the concerns of GMO opponents. Since vegetables are harvested when they are immature, he says they don't pollinate. Therefore, Manassero says, the crops wouldn't cross-pollinate. As for organic farmers losing business, Manassero calls it a "scare tactic that is being used to push the GMO ordinance in Monterey County."

If Monterey County sides with GE crops, Sancen says it could hurt the county's farming reputation. Sancen points

to the drawbacks of GE crops, including increased food allergies, damage to beneficial insects and the creation of "superweeds." "It's not just for small farmers," he says. "It's for the whole ag industry."

Indeed, fruit and vegetable crops are one of the last stands in an ag industry increasingly dominated by GE crops. Since their introduction in 1996 GE crops have ballooned to make up more than 80 percent of soybean production and more than 60 percent of cotton acreage. Sancen calls on the county to rein in GMOs before they spread locally. "We have to regulate this," he says.

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