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Genetically altered crop ban sought

By **DAWN WITHERS**
The Salinas Californian

Concerns that genetically modified crops might contaminate Monterey County produce have prompted a group of residents to seek a ban.

A few residents and many organic farmers are asking the Monterey County Board of Supervisors to place a moratorium on the use of genetically modified crops - similar to one enacted in Santa Cruz County in 2006 - because of potential health and environmental risks.

The Monterey County Agricultural Advisory

Committee held the first public review of the request Thursday. Committee members didn't make a decision but said they will hold further hearings on the matter before making any suggestions to supervisors.

"This is a very deliberative body," said committee chairman, Jim Manassero.

Ruth Smith of Carmel is one of three county residents to write letters concerning genetically modified crops.

"It's extraordinarily disastrous what can happen," Smith said. "It can kill people and destroy economies."

Dozens of local organic growers have also written to county officials asking that the use of genetically modified crops be restricted.

"Our customers are worried about genetically modified (crops)," said Alex Sancen, an organic grower with the Agriculture and Land-Based Training Association.

Bob Roach, assistant agricultural commissioner, said genetically modified crops are not used in the county. Seeds for the crop varieties grown throughout the Salinas Valley are produced through conventional cross-breeding techniques, he said.

Roach said the county has an ordinance going back about 30 years regulating the experimental release of genetically modified bio-organisms after a researcher tried to release genetically engineered bacteria on strawberries in north county to prevent frost damage. No ordinance specifically deals with plants, however.

The existing ordinance requires a use permit to be issued for such experiments, and Roach said no one has ever requested such a permit since the ordinance was approved.

Lorna Moffat, who wrote a letter earlier this month to supervisors about genetically modified crops, said part of her concerns are based on a talk that Henry Daniell, Pegasus, professor and trustee chairman at the University of Central Florida in Orlando, gave in Salinas in November about a genetically modified lettuce that could produce insulin, the hormone used to treat diabetes.

"Pharmaceutical companies are paying to create medicines through plants because it's cheaper for them," Moffat said.
