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Biotech crops get backing in poll

But 30 percent want state to ban them.

By Jim Wasserman -- Bee Staff Writer

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As Sonoma County voters consider making theirs the fourth California county to ban genetically modified crops, backers of agricultural biotechnology have released a poll showing 54 percent of likely state voters believe farmers should be able to grow biotech crops.

Thirty percent believe biotech crops should be banned from California's fields, the poll says, and 16 percent of those surveyed said they didn't know. Asked if they would consider buying foods containing biotech ingredients, 53 percent of respondents said they would, while 37 percent said they would not.

The findings come as national, state and local opponents of genetically modified crops aim to pass a voter-approved ban on the crops in Sonoma County on Nov. 8.

Renata Brillinger and other supporters of the measure questioned the survey results, saying answers depend on how questions are phrased. Brillinger, director of Californians for GE-Free Agriculture, explained that more people are opposed when they hear biotech crops described as genetically modified.

Similarly, Ryan Zinn of Minnesota-based Organic Consumers Association said people often don't realize biotech foods aren't labeled.

If they heard this and also learned that neither the U.S. Department of Agriculture nor the Environmental Protection Agency tests these crops, said Zinn, the organization's San Francisco campaign coordinator, "I doubt any right-minded person would give the green light to plant these foods or crops."

If passed, a Sonoma County ban would join those already in effect in Mendocino, Marin and Trinity counties. Next year biotech opponents are considering still more county ballot measures, with Sacramento, Yolo, Nevada and Placer counties among potential targets.

The telephone survey of 900 likely voters showed support for genetically engineered crops is highest in the state's agricultural Central Valley and among those who claim to know "a lot about biotech crops."

In the San Joaquin and Sacramento valleys, 68 percent of those surveyed said farmers should be able to grow them, while 72 percent of those who said they know a lot about biotech crops agreed.

Agricultural biotechnology is the science of transferring genes - the small biological units that shape life - between species. So far, biotech farming largely makes crop plants resistant to weedkillers and gives plants an ability to kill insects.

California has an estimated 600,000 acres of biotech crops, mostly cotton and corn largely grown in the Central Valley. Globally, farmers planted 200 million acres last year, according to the Council for Biotechnology Information in Washington, D.C.

With three months until the Sonoma County vote, elections officials reported Monday the anti-biotech GE-Free Sonoma County Committee has so far raised \$155,605 for its campaign to ban biotech crops in the wine-growing and dairy county. The pro-biotech Family Farmers Alliance has raised \$136,827, elections officials said.

The survey, which was in the field from May 3-5, was commissioned by a pro-biotech coalition that includes the California Chamber of Commerce; St. Louis-based biotechnology giant Monsanto Co.; and BIOCOM San Diego, a trade association of Southern California biotech firms.

Statewide, 54 percent of those surveyed said they knew biotech crops are already grown in California and 51 percent knew California grocery stores sell foods made from biotech crops.

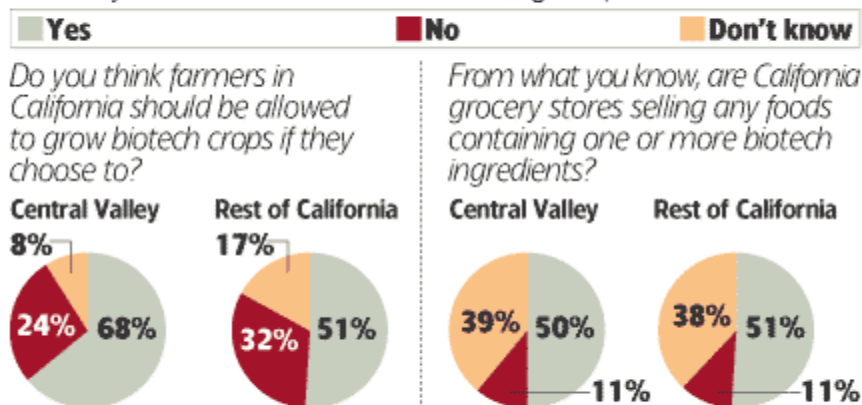
"There's a tremendous benefit for use of biotech crops not only in California but across the country," said Jesús Arredondo, a Monsanto spokesman in California. "What we see is that people in California are noticing, and are comfortable with biotech crops."

About the writer:

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Raising awareness

An agricultural biotechnology poll commissioned by supporters shows likely voters in the Central Valley are more supportive of genetically modified crops than likely voters in the rest of the state. Among the questions:



Note: New York-based Republican polling firm McLaughlin & Associates and Democratic pollster Hart Research Associates of Washington, D.C., conducted the survey of 900 likely voters from May 3-5. The results have a margin of error of plus or minus 3.3 percentage points and a 95 percent confidence level.

Sources: McLaughlin and Associates; Hart Research Associates Sacramento Bee/Olivia Nguyen

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