

## County board supports biotech

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Stronger, more resilient fruits and vegetables, or "Frankenfoods"?

Stanislaus County entered the growing debate over genetically engineered crops Tuesday as the Board of Supervisors unanimously adopted a resolution in support of biotechnology in agriculture.

Supervisors say the vote was critical to protect the livelihood of the county's No. 1 industry. Stanislaus County farmers and ranchers brought in a record \$1.98 billion in revenue in 2004, making Stanislaus the No. 7 ag-producing county in California.

"These genetic improvements have led to longer shelf lives, allowed us to use less pesticides," Supervisor Jim DeMartini said after Tuesday's meeting. "This is the type of technology that has led us to safe and affordable food supplies worldwide."

The longtime peach and almond farmer's thoughts on biotechnology echo those of the state's largest farming organizations, including the California Farm Bureau Federation and California Cattlemen's Association.

Genetic engineering of crops describes the common practice of combining genetic materials at the DNA level to create "improved" and more resilient species of plants. It's primarily used in cotton and corn production. Corn is the No. 8 revenue-producing crop in Stanislaus County.

Proponents call this gene modification one of the more important agricultural advancements in centuries, allowing growers to develop crops that are better protected against disease, bugs and weeds, and reduces the need to spray with chemicals.

"Agriculture is under a tremendous pressure to do more with less," Ed Perry, a farm adviser with the University of California Cooperative Extension in Stanislaus County, told supervisors Tuesday. "This technology is really no different than what we've been able to do for thousands of years, it's just a more precise way to do genetic engineering to get what we want."

"That benefits not only us, but society in general."

But for the last two years, voters in a handful of California counties have seen initiatives that would ban or limit the growing of genetically engineered crops.

In 2004, Mendocino, Marin and Trinity counties became the first in the nation to adopt such initiatives, fueling the debate over genetically altered foods. The controversy is expected to continue this fall as nine counties, mostly small ag producers on the coast, consider similar bans.

The fear is that too little is known about the long-term effects of so-called "Frankenfoods" on consumers, the environment and cross-contamination with organic crops, said Dave Henson, primary author of an initiative in Sonoma County that would institute a 10-year ban on growing genetically engineered produce.

"I'm personally not against genetic engineering; I just think we need 10 years to study it," said Henson, executive director of the Occidental Arts and Ecology Center. "And I think in this issue, the ag bureau is representing the interests of the ag industry and not small farmers."

A bill in the state Senate would prohibit counties from banning biotechnology in agriculture, giving the decision to the state.

Supporters of biotechnology call the effort to ban its practice a result of "misinformation" and "junk science."

"To ban it is impractical. There has never been any adverse effects to GMOs (genetically modified organisms)," DeMartini said. "It's like taking a bean and putting it together with corn. They're both good foods; there's nothing wrong with it. (Opponents) have their own self-interests. This is junk science and scare tactics."

Stanislaus County's motive Tuesday was to take a public stand on this issue, DeMartini said. The county joins the ag-rich counties of Merced, Fresno, Kern and Tulare in adopting resolutions of support.

Judy Kjelstrom, director of the biotechnology program at the University of California at Davis, said the science of genetic engineering has gotten lost in the debate over its ethics.

"The real issue is that this is sending mixed messages to our children about biotechnology," Kjelstrom said. "It's a political issue and (the opponent's argument) is not based in science. The (genetically-engineering free) movement is more religious than anything else."

"Let's have a good debate on the science, but that's not what is happening."

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