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Ag regulation law a must

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The Assembly should move quickly to approve Sen. Dean Florez's bill that would standardize regulation of genetically engineered nursery stock and seed. The bill passed the Senate on June 1 with a 31-8 vote.

Without SB 1056, stock distributors, seed outlets, growers and product retailers will face an unmanageable mishmash of conflicting local sale and use regulations.

SB 1056 would extend the existing California Seed Law to include genetically modified seed. The seed law ensures statewide uniformity of registration, labeling, sale, storage, transportation, and distribution of seed and products for consumers statewide. Compliance monitoring is done by county agricultural commissioners.

If passed in its current form, the bill would allow local restrictive regulations that have already passed in Marin, Mendocino, Santa Cruz and Trinity counties. More progressive regulations supporting genetically engineered crops in Kern, Fresno, Kings, San Benito and San Diego counties would revert to the state's uniform seed law and extensive federal oversight.

In concept, genetic engineering differs little from traditional plant grafting and animal selective breeding in order to produce more desirable product qualities.

What is different is the intricacy, predictability and speed with which the change can evolve in the laboratory compared to a generational pace in the field.

The Shafter Democrat's bill does not regulate what seeds are legal. The bill recognizes existing federal regulatory oversight of permitted products.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture regulates proposed new products before and during field testing.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency assures environmental health and safety of biotechnology products and impacts of them on natural products.

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration determines whether foods derived from genetically engineered seed are safe and properly labeled.

It is only after those regulatory standards are met that Florez's proposed state registration, labeling and distribution rules would go into effect.

Some opposition to the bill comes from people who simply do not like technological progress. But better quality and yield of food is vital to feed a growing worldwide population.

Other opposition, however, comes from growers of organic products who fear that biotechnology seed could become intermingled in the field with their own.

But good agricultural management practices overseen by local inspectors can mitigate inadvertent field contamination. And the potential of such an eventuality is minor compared the chaos that will occur without a uniform-use law, such as Florez's.

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