



Capital Press

The West's Ag Website

Friday, June 30, 2006

Don't create patchwork of GMO rules

Friday, June 30, 2006

Santa Cruz County, Calif., is the latest battle front in the years-long war over growing genetically modified crops. It won't be the last.

Santa Cruz County supervisors last week joined three other California counties – Mendocino, Trinity and Marin – in curbing the propagation of GMO crops. The board put a moratorium on them until warning labels can be placed on food with GMO ingredients.

The unanimous decision came “even though no one is growing genetically modified crops locally,” the Santa Cruz Sentinel said in a June 23 editorial.

Santa Cruz commissioners are not alone in their decision to offer a cure where no ailment exists. Their decision combines the main element of a 2002 initiative in Oregon demanding GMO labels on food with other efforts in California to ban the production of GMO crops.

Even in Oregon, where many urban voters are known for their liberal politics, the label initiative failed by a huge margin.

At the urging of the food-processing industry and other agricultural groups, which argued having a one-state law on labels was expensive and unworkable, 70 percent of Oregon voters rejected the initiative.

That logic aside, the effort to label or ban GMO food continues in California. The long and windy debate has migrated from county to county across much of the state.

At the center of the debate are concerns over whether GMO crops might potentially cross-pollinate with non-GMO and organic crops, whether they might inadvertently promote insects that are resistant to organic and other methods of pest control, whether they might otherwise interfere with organic growers and whether GMO food might somehow hurt consumers.

Although the concerns are many, the facts supporting them are few.

This comes at a time when the propagation of GMO crops is on the rise in the U.S., where more GMO crops are grown than anywhere else. In 2004, 85 percent of U.S. soybean acreage, 76 percent of cotton acreage and 45 percent of corn acreage was planted to genetically modified seed.

Other GMO crops include canola, papaya and squash. Most recently, GMO alfalfa was introduced.

Much of the seed is genetically altered to produce bacillus thuringiensis, or Bt toxin, which wards off insects that would damage crops.

This is the same Bt toxin some organic farmers use to protect their plants. However, they worry the wider occurrence of Bt toxin could cause insects to become resistant to it.

Another GMO seed contains a genetic trait that makes it resistant to glyphosate. That allows farmers to spray to kill weeds without damaging the crop.

Worldwide, about 25 percent of all cropland – 167.2 million acres – is planted to GMO crops, according to the Pew Initiative on

Food and Biotechnology, a non-profit, non-partisan research project whose aim is to inform the public about agricultural biotechnology.

Along with the U.S., Canada, Brazil, Argentina, China and South Africa grow 99 percent of the world's GMO crops.

While the production of GMO crops is increasing year by year, the public's acceptance of GMO food crops is split, a new survey for the European Commission found.

The survey, whose results were released last week, found that overall only 27 percent of the residents in 25 European Union countries supported GMO foods.

The majority of residents of only five European countries – Ireland, Italy, Lithuania, Malta, Portugal, Spain and the Czech Republic – support GMO food.

The California debate over growing GMO crops will continue to skip from county to county, creating a patchwork quilt of regulation that in turn will place a much larger burden on farmers and consumers than GMO crops would ever cause by themselves.

While such debates are healthy exercises in democracy, the results are unhealthy for agriculture, which is burdened by enough regulations already.

If the regulation of GMO crops is to occur, it needs to be on a regional or national level, not by random counties.

Related Links

Content © 2006 Capital Press
Software © 1998-2006 1up! Software, All Rights Reserved