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## Genetically modified crops back on the table

**Supervisors will reopen the debate on altered produce with a report that offers the growers' side of the story**

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Two years after voters countywide rejected a ballot measure to ban genetically modified crops, the Board of Supervisors is expected to reopen the issue with a report by the county agriculture commissioner.

That report — from a committee offering the growers' perspective — would be the fourth report sent to county supervisors on the controversy.

Earlier this week, the county Health Commission voted, without taking a political stance, to submit three reports discussing the issues surrounding genetic engineering of crops.

One report was from the commission's own task force. The others were furnished by SLO GE Free, a local group opposed to genetically modified foods — one produced locally, the other from Santa Cruz County that spurred officials there to pass a moratorium on growing these crops.

Local governments statewide have debated whether genetically modified crops are benign biotech advances or changes in the natural food supply with potential harmful consequences.

Currently, only genetically engineered corn is believed to be grown in San Luis Obispo County, with some interest in modified alfalfa, according to the agriculture commissioner's report to supervisors. Outdoor test plots under federal permits may be developing in this county as well.

The agriculture commissioner's report notes that the issue is of international significance, with trade agreements and government regulations controlling these crops.

After Measure Q failed in 2004, supervisors called for the creation of two task forces to examine the effects on health and agriculture of genetically modified crops.

Both panels drafted reports that explore the pros and cons of genetically modified foods but do not take a position on the issue.

Instead of making a recommendation to the board, the commissioners asked that the supervisors create a new task force that looks at the broader issues around genetically modified foods.

"I would like to ask the Board of Supervisors to expand the task force," commissioner Pam Heatherington said.

Heatherington's motion gained unanimous approval from a commission that appeared exhausted Monday night by the issue and eager to pass it on to another body.

SLO GE Free submitted its own report and the one from Santa Cruz County because it claimed the Health Commission task force study was inadequate.

"In our opinion, the GMO Task Force failed to meet its goal," Mike Zelina of SLO GE Free said.

At least 15 speakers at the commission meeting expressed their concerns about what they described as the lack of government regulation over genetically engineered foods.

There is no way to ensure that bioengineered seeds will not drift and contaminate organic crops, Zelina said.

His group urged that the commission recommend labeling modified food products and identifying where such crops are grown.

According to UC Berkeley's Division of Agriculture and Natural Resources, four counties in California have passed ordinances banning genetically modified crops: Trinity, Mendocino, Marin and Santa Cruz. Twelve others, mostly in the San Joaquin Valley, have passed ordinances in support of genetically modified crops.

State Sen. Dean Florez, D-Kern County, hopes to stop more counties from passing ordinances against genetically modified crops with his

bill, SB 1056.

The bill passed several committees and will soon head to the Assembly floor for a vote. The four counties that already passed ordinances banning genetically modified foods would be exempt.

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