
Posted on Wed, Aug. 23, 2006

Supervisors decide to leave food guidelines to farmers

Board challenges community to find a way to allow engineered crops while protecting organic growers

By Sarah Arnquist
sarnquist@thetribunenews.com

After listening to nearly four hours of impassioned debate on Tuesday, the Board of Supervisors decided regulation of genetically engineered crops is best left to those most knowledgeable about them -- the farmers.

Supervisors challenged the agricultural community to create and implement guidelines that allow conventional farmers to grow genetically engineered crops while protecting organic farmers.

"What I've been hearing is the need to protect our organic farmers," Supervisor Jim Patterson said.

Organic farmers say they face huge financial losses if their crops -- grown without pesticides or synthetic fertilizers -- are contaminated by pollen from nearby fields of genetically modified crops.

In 2004, San Luis Obispo County voters defeated Measure Q, which would have banned the growing of genetically engineered crops. But the public debate never ended.

County supervisors created two task forces last year to examine the health and agricultural implications of these crops.

The county spent about \$30,000 to staff those groups, which reported their findings Tuesday. Supervisors rejected the idea of creating an additional task force to study the issue further.

Farmers, scientists and activists filled the board chambers Tuesday. The contentious debate, filled with personal jabs, emphasized how divisive the genetically modified foods issue has become.

Opponents of genetically engineered food equated it to "bastardizing nature" and warned of the possible harmful health consequences.

Some pointed out holes in the federal regulatory process and recent evidence that these products are nearly impossible to contain once planted in the open environment.

Others emphasized to supervisors the nutritional and economic advantages this biotechnology possesses.

John DeVincenzo has grown genetically engineered corn for six years. He prefers the modified corn because it requires less pesticide and maintenance than traditional corn, he said.

"There are significant advantages to genetically modified crops," he told the supervisors.

Prominent proposals

Labeling genetically modified foods and notifying farmers where those crops are planted were the two prominent themes that emerged in Tuesday's discussion.

Local organic farmers such as Ryan Rich say they need to protect their crops from contamination by the pollen of genetically engineered crops, but they can't do so unless they know where modified crops are planted.

"If we don't have notification, all our organic crops are at risk," Rich said. "We have potentially everything to lose."

DeVincenzo said he is willing to label his corn as genetically modified.

This issue could soon become moot at the local level. A bill before state lawmakers would wipe out any future local attempt at regulating genetically modified crops.

The proposal by Sen. Dean Florez, D-Fresno, is set to be voted on within two weeks, and if it's passed by the Legislature and signed into law by Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, it will authorize only the state to regulate such crops.

The state has no laws or regulations on genetically modified crops and defers to the federal government.

Supervisor Patterson said that worries him because the federal government lacks uniform regulations.

"We have no protections so it's up to us," he said.

Patterson's motion to write a letter opposing Florez's bill failed by a 3-2 vote, with Supervisor Shirley Bianchi voting in support of Patterson.

There was strong support for labeling genetically modified foods -- something beyond the control of county supervisors. People asked the supervisors to support federal legislation to require labeling and to explore labeling at local farmers markets.

"I believe consumers should know what they're eating," said Dr. Gregory Thomas, the county's public health director.

People can avoid eating genetically modified foods by buying those that are labeled as certified organic.

© 2006 San Luis Obispo Tribune and wire service sources. All Rights Reserved.
<http://www.sanluisobispo.com>