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Organic farmers' initiative plants seeds of dissent / Mendocino County debates ban on genetically altered organisms

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December 23, 2003 | By Glen Martin, Chronicle Environment Writer

If local organic farmers have their way, Mendocino County will become the first county in the nation to ban genetically modified organisms --

corn that contains toxin-producing genes from bacteria, salmon crossed with flounder, goats harboring spider DNA, and other plants and critters not seen on earth in 2 billion years of evolution.

Earlier this month, the Mendocino County Board of Supervisors authorized an initiative prohibiting the cultivation or raising of genetically modified seeds, plants and animals. Residents will vote on the issue on the March 2 ballot. The development is being closely tracked by commercial farming interests and the large corporations that produce genetically modified organisms, or GMOs.

In a preliminary legal shot across the bow Monday, an agribusiness interest group filed suit in Mendocino County Superior Court to quash the initiative.

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The county's organic growers -- who eschew pesticides and artificial fertilizers, and cultivate only old-fashioned, unmodified crops -- say the ban is needed if they're to maintain their organic certification. They note that genes from modified crops have been known to drift with pollen and infuse related unmodified plants with foreign DNA.

Under certification standards adopted last year by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, any food that is the product of genetic engineering cannot carry the "organic" label.

"We're definitely supporting (the initiative), and so are a lot of other growers we know," said Jonathan Frey, the proprietor of Frey Vineyards near Ukiah. Frey cultivates 110 acres of organic vineyard and produces about 50,000 cases of organic wine annually, both from his own grapes and from the vineyards of 15 other organically certified growers.

GMO producers say the initiative is much ado about very little. GMO crops are the future of agriculture, they say, and serve as a boon for both the economy and the environment.

"These crops provide huge benefits, including greatly reduced pesticide use," said Shannon Troughton, a spokeswoman for Monsanto, the country's leading producer of genetically modified food plants. "What's important is that consumers have a choice."

The initiative would have little immediate effect. There are no commercially available genetically modified versions of Mendocino's major crops, including wine grapes. But proponents of the technology say it is only a matter of time, and that once those crops are introduced, contamination of organic products is a possibility.

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