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## Conversations with folks in the first US county to ban GM crops

### Dissecting how Mendocino beat the biotech industry's deep pockets

By Don Lotter

**August 17, 2004:** When I heard that the Mendocino effort to ban genetically modified crops had won, the first successful effort in the US, I was truly surprised and pleased. I knew that the biotechnology industry had been pouring money into opposing the initiative with slick advertisements and tricky sound bites. Oregonians had tried to pass a GMO food labeling law and had been soundly beaten with lots of disinformative advertising and questionable arguments brought in too late in the campaign to be effectively rebutted. So how did Mendocino do it?

The driving force behind the brilliantly carried out Measure H campaign was Els Cooperider, a 50-something former biologist who owns only the second certified organic restaurant in the US and the first organic brewpub in the country, the Ukiah Brewing Co. organic restaurant and brewpub.

Cooperider, and her husband, Alan, who has a degree in botany, had followed the development of genetic engineering of food crops as most informed northern Californians have - with dismay. The huge flaws in the science of genetic engineering, the covered-up animal feeding studies that show serious health problems, and the utterly corrupt lack of oversight by the US Food and Drug Administration (all detailed in the book "[Seeds of Deception](#)" by Jeffrey Smith), was enough to give Cooperider the impetus to start a campaign.

"We knew what we would be up against from reading and hearing about the Oregon experience, but we decided that just getting a GM crops ban on the ballot would at least educate people on the issue, even if it failed," says Cooperider.

Cooperider had run for local public office before and knew a few things about campaigning and had good connections in the community. This was a start. Most importantly, however, she knew that most of the people in the county were firmly against the genetic engineering of crops and foods. Home of media like the Anderson Valley Advertiser, a small newspaper known around Northern California for its incisive, in-depth reporting on issues that don't make the mainstream news, Mendocino County was as good a county as any in the US to try being the first to ban GM crops.

The campaign was well thought out from the beginning. Cooperider was careful not to announce the campaign until as late in the game as possible and kept the plans carefully limited to circle of a few trusted friends. This way the opposition, which she knew would hit hard, would have less time to build their campaign. With an early November deadline to turn in signatures, the signature gathering campaign wasn't announced until late August, about a two month timeline.

Committees were put together, advisors sought out, and area coordinators appointed for each community in the county. The failed Oregon campaign was intensively studied. When the actual wording of the measure was developed, they took a big lesson from the Oregon experience and kept the wording simple and limited to less than one page. In layperson's language, the Measure H initiative prohibited the propagation of genetically engineered crops and animals in the county. The measure limited itself to crops and did not deal with microbial transgenics, as bacterial genetics are distinct from plant genetics and don't have nearly the risk of pollen drift and ecological contamination. Plus, many medicines are developed via bacterial transgenics, and they didn't want to deal with that.

A dozen forums were organized and speakers like Ignacio Chapela, the UC Berkeley professor who uncovered the transgene contamination of Mexican native corn, Marc Lappé, author of books about the dangers of genetically altered foods, Percy Schmeiser, the Canadian farmer who was fighting Monsanto in court at the time, and Miguel Altieri, agroecology professor from UC Berkeley. They even had a forum in Spanish. The forums were very well attended, sometimes filling an auditorium to standing room only.

It took the opposition a while to build a campaign, which probably won't happen in future anti-GMO campaigns anywhere else. For one thing, Cooperider believes, they underestimated her. "They thought I was just this organic housewife and restaurant owner," she says. But with two months to go CropLife America, the main industry-sponsored pro-GMO organization, had started their campaign and were helping dispense what would end up amounting to nearly a million dollars from the pro-GMO side. The pro-GMOers recruited scientists from the University of California to present their views in the forums.

The slick pro-GMO advertisements claimed that county taxes would have to be significantly raised in order to enforce the ban, and that the privacy of people's backyards, cars, and houses would be intruded upon by inspectors. These spurious claims were effectively

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### Meet a Mendocino Farmer



#### Matt Molyneaux of Good Family Flowers

The gardens, which have been cultivated for almost 100 years, feature forty varieties of organically grown flowers on 15,000 sq. ft. An additional 2+ acres is planted in mixed vegetables. The remaining land is dedicated to agritourism. Guest facilities and educational opportunities help connect families and children to the land.

countered in the forums by the Measure H side.

The Frey family, local makers of organic wines, played a prominent role in the campaign. Katrina Frey was the Measure H fundraiser, raising \$130,000 by the end of the campaign. Jonathan and Paul Frey played an important role in the debates, having learned a good deal about the immensely complex world of genetics and transgenes, as well as the history of bad science and no science, cover-ups, the silencing and firing of government and university scientists, and the biotech industry sponsored viral PR campaigns attacking researchers whose work shows negative results in experiments on transgene products.

**Nature of Operation:**  
organic, not certified

**Production Categories:**  
Herbs/flowers  
Flowers, dried  
Flowers, fresh

**Markets Served:** Farmers Markets,  
Wholesale

Learn more about Good Family  
Flowers on their [Farm Locator page](#).

By the time the UC scientists came to the forums the Frey brothers, whose quiet intelligence is obvious to anyone getting into a conversation with them, were prepared. "The Freys pretty much blew the UC scientists out of the water" said one local source. The UC people were simply unprepared for the amount of information the Freys had command of and could not answer effectively. After the usual pro-GMO arguments like "the precision of gene insertion" were exposed as deeply flawed and shockingly under-researched as to safety, and after arguments like "reducing pesticide use" were also rebutted, the GMO proponents brought up, as they usually do, the "need to feed the world with biotechnology", giving the example of "golden rice" (transgene rice which produces vitamin A). A few facts exposed golden rice for what it is: a \$100 million boondoggle more for saving the biotechnology industry than for saving third world children. A two-year old child would need to eat seven pounds a day of the golden rice to get the vitamin A available in a serving of garden greens. The money spent on developing golden rice would have been better spent teaching people how to grow greens.

Cooperider was advised by a former PR professional on how to respond to attacks by the opposition, "We were advised not to respond at all to most of the attacks and claims." This was difficult and counter-intuitive, according to Cooperider, but it apparently worked. For example, the Measure H people had made a mistake in the text of the initiative by using the term "protein" when referring to DNA. It was a small flaw that didn't affect the basic premise of the measure, but it opened them to attacks. In the forums, when this was brought up by the pro-GMO side, Cooperider simply said nothing and waited for the next question, since nearly all of the people there knew the wording didn't make any difference in the larger scheme of things.

Another tactic the Measure H campaigners took was to not use the word "organic" anytime in the campaign. They really needed to get all of the farmers and agriculture people on board, not just the organic people. "I really worked hard to keep everyone in the campaign on the same page," says Cooperider, "we didn't want to have the same experience as in Oregon, where the campaign split into two factions."

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The campaign became intense. Personalities had to be managed. People were working on little sleep.

Strategic endorsements from well-known citizens and organizations of the county's communities were sought out and won. The county sheriff came on board, a mayor, realtors, public health officials, and the Fetzer winery, a big one.

One of the big pluses for the Measure H campaign was that people, in voting, really felt they were going to make a difference. It was an issue with national and global importance that a few thousand local voters would decide.

In the end Measure H won easily, 57% to 43%. Cooperider took several months to recuperate, having put in easily 60-80 hours a week in addition to her business.

The successful Mendocino campaign has catalyzed similar anti-GM crops campaigns in another five or six counties in California and a dozen around the US. The Measure H veterans recently hosted a workshop for anti-GM crop campaigners or potential campaigners in nine other counties.

In nearby Butte County, where rice farming is big, there is an anti-GM crops campaign in full swing, and the disinformative tactics of the pro-GMO lobby are already evident. Back in the 1950s plant breeders used radiation to induce mutations in rice and went on to develop cultivars that are currently still grown. The pro-GM crops campaign is calling these cultivars "genetically engineered", which would mean they would be banned.

This argument is spurious. Anyone familiar with biology knows that in nature there is a lot of radiation, especially from the sun, and that plants and microbes have evolved mechanisms to adapt to this destructive energy, including to genetic mutations caused by radiation. Induced mutations are a far cry from the genetic engineering practice of literally shooting (via using gold-coated genetic particles) a taxonomically foreign gene into the genome of a plant, something no organisms have ever been exposed to. Jeffrey Smith's book details the many serious flaws in this practice.

These are watershed years in the development of humanity's approach to food, and the Mendocino anti-GM crops campaign is a major step in the direction of keeping the integrity of our food and agriculture.

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