

[Home](#)[About Us](#)[Local Food](#)

- [Local Food](#)

[Factsheets](#)

- [Legislative Tracker](#)
- [Local Control Toolkit](#)
- [Seed Law Preemption](#)
- [CA Food Democracy](#)
- [Articles & News](#)

[GMOs](#)[Precautionary Principle](#)[Toxics](#)

What is Mendocino County's Measure H & What Does it Have to do with Food Democracy?

- by [Britt Bailey](#)



"Something is happening to the very soul of America."

- Rep. John Lewis, D-Georgia¹

March 2, 2004

No longer able to contain the anticipation, I belted myself into my car and wound my way over the Mendocino mountain roads to the county seat in Ukiah, CA. Ukiah was where all of the votes were being counted as well as the location for "Measure H Headquarters." "Headquarters," also known as the Ukiah Brewing Company, was where the citizens of Mendocino County, California gathered to learn if the county would become the first region in the United States to successfully proclaim themselves free from foods and livestock that had been genetically modified.

I had planned to wait out the vote counting at home. But with years of involvement researching, writing, and speaking on the conflicts and controversies surrounding agricultural biotechnology, the excitement in the country air got the better of me.

"Measure H"

"Measure H" was an initiative introduced by the people of Mendocino County. Its intention - to prohibit the growing and raising of genetically modified foods or livestock within county borders. Concerned by the continuing international reports showing that genetically modified organisms were cross-pollinating and contaminating nearby crops, citizen members of the Mendocino Organic Network began seeking a way to safeguard their organically grown foods. They led the campaign that would be called "**Measure H**."

In a short span of time, genetically modified organisms (GMOs), commercially introduced in the United States eight years prior, were now being planted on 200 million acres worldwide. To place this amount in perspective, imagine the entire landmass of California, Oregon, and some of Washington State. That is the amount of land dedicated to genetically modified organisms (GMOs) at the end of 2003.

Genetically modified organisms constitute a hot economic market and an even hotter political and social debate. To the handful of companies hocking the new fangled plants, their

claims include that the added DNA bestows industrial advantages for large agricultural business ventures. To the eating public, the resulting foods have been perceived as freakish and perilous to ecosystems and public health.

While some of the risks have been exaggerated (and certainly many of the benefits as well), others have proven worthy of their global outcry. Little overt evidence exists pointing directly to human health impacts, however the ecological consequences from gene flow between plants, impacts to beneficial organisms, and increased use of pesticides seem genuine.

A major predicament for those concerned about the risks from cultivating GMOs included that neither states nor the federal government seemed interested in mending perceived inadequate regulations. Labeling requests were being rebuffed at every turn. Calls for moratoriums, however temporary, were being passed off as outlandish. How could so many voices throughout the world be so completely disregarded?

In the weeks leading up to the election, I worked on the "Measure H" campaign by speaking at local events on the risks of genetically modified foods. Although I was more prepared to talk about and answer questions on genetically modified organisms, I quickly realized my first words needed to focus on voting and registration. "Are you registered to vote?" I would ask. An unnerving though common answer was "why should I register to vote? My view is never represented."

For many of the people who had become involved the "Measure H" campaign, it was the first time in years they had voted much less been caught up in politics. Many had left behind the idea that they would see the benefits of their voting efforts.

The Votes Are Tallied

As I ducked inside "headquarters," organic beer was flowing as the county website was simulcast onto the walls for the crowd to see. With each passing moment, we could see the results of the election. Folks from all corners of Mendocino had turned out to either go down in flames or celebrate our spark together. There was denseness to the air as we held our breath for the final results.

The official announcement came in right around 9:00 PM - as we held our collective breath we realized that Measure H passed by 57% of the vote! Mendocino County voters had successfully said "No" to the growing and raising of genetically modified organisms within the Mendocino County borders.

The final vote seemed fitting for a county where people live a life unencumbered by strip malls, corporate decisions, and Washington politics. The road less traveled certainly leads to this beautiful county. Mendocino provides rugged coastline, thick forests, coastal mountains, and gorgeous farming valleys. It has 80,000 citizens nestled mainly into unincorporated

towns and 4 tiny cities. Many of the folks live off of the land, hold strong opinions, and generally carry a healthy skepticism of politics. The people march to the beat of full moon drum circles, contra dances, and Buddhist chants.

Mendocino's agricultural economy consists largely of trees grown for timber and fruit. Its subtropical climate is nearly perfect for pears, apples, and redwoods. Though in the past decade, wine grapes have become a major economic commodity. The primary seed crops that have been genetically modified (soybeans, canola, corn, potatoes) are largely non-existent in Mendocino. Small farmers, most of whom use organic practices, grow some seed crops such as corn, lettuce, and alfalfa. Consequently, "Measure H" was largely symbolic or precautionary in its nature.

Food Democracy

After our initial celebratory yells, it was only moments before every one in the room realized something far greater had happened with the passage of "Measure H."

With a win we had pronounced that we held a different vision for the ways in which foods would be grown in our county. We announced to the Associated Press, which would deliver the news to the world, that our dream of growing foods sustainably, reverently, and free of biologically added DNA was being fulfilled. Simultaneously, we had stopped a powerful corporate convoy bullying its way into far reaching global fields.

For me the greatest outcome from the victorious news embracing the crowd was witnessed in the eyes of everyone I saw. The eyes of the public were lit with the passion and enthusiasm that comes from being involved in the democratic process. People were ecstatic to find that their involvement in an internationally powerful and controversial issue effected change. And, folks were truly joyous to know that Mendocino County agriculture would be secured against the spread of GMOs. As I scanned the faces in celebration, I caught the eyes of one of the county's supervisors present. I said, "it is like we the people retrieved our souls." Before he offered a hug, he nodded in agreement.

Driving home from "Headquarters" the evening of March 2, 2004, I pondered my "soul" statement. Had people regained their souls because they got involved in the democratic process? Granted our country is vast both geographically and attitudinally, but why do people feel so unrepresented by decisions made at the state and national level that many do not even bother to vote much less register? Why with so much controversy surrounding GMOs and its technology, not only nationally but also internationally, are governments so reluctant to introduce more rigorous food biotechnology legislation?

See also:
Mendocino County's GMO Ordinance

¹ Lewis, John, Speaking at HRC Headquarters on Nov. 16, 2004.

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info@EnvironmentalCommons.org



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