

Genetic Engineering Bill Held Over in Assembly Agriculture Committee

Sacramento- Assemblymember Jared Huffman's bill, AB 541, The Food and Farm Protection Act, was tabled in a hearing of the Assembly Agriculture Committee yesterday, after passing out of the Judiciary Committee two weeks ago.

AB 541 addresses the problems arising when genetically engineered plants cross-pollinate or otherwise contaminate non-GE crops. It establishes that the GE crop manufacturer — and not the farmer who planted the GE crop — is the responsible party if contamination occurs and causes economic damages to others. The bill also establishes a notification system for GE crops, and prohibits the open-air production of food crops genetically engineered to produce pharmaceutical drugs, a practice that puts consumers at an unacceptably high risk of inadvertently eating pharmaceutical drugs.

"In proposing this bill, we are attempting to find a middle ground with this controversial issue," stated Assemblymember Huffman. "There are those who wish the bill went further, and there are those who want no regulation of GE crops at all. I believe that AB 541 puts forward a reasonable and responsible policy that addresses the risk of GE contamination, without banning any crops or restricting access to drugs."

Also testifying at the hearing in support of AB 541 was Greg Massa, Co-Chair of the Rice Producers of California. Referring to a series of GE contamination events that have devastated the Southern U.S. rice industry, Massa said, "Should a similar event occur in California, the rice industry here stands to lose entire markets in Japan, Korea and Taiwan, an estimated value of \$200 million annually. The California rice industry as we know it will collapse if GMO contamination occurs. AB 541 provides necessary safeguards for our industry."

This is the third time in three years that a bill dealing with GE has stalled in a legislative committee. In 2005, Assemblymember Laird introduced a bill (AB 984) dealing with the liability problem; it failed to get a motion and was later withdrawn. Then in 2006, a Monsanto-backed bill (SB 1056) that would have stripped county rights to pass GE restrictions died in committee in the face of considerable opposition. These bills and other events in California — the narrowly averted planting of pharmaceutical GE rice in 2004, the wave of county bans in 2004 through 2006, and most recently the rice contamination scare — point to the need for statewide policies.

Assemblymember Huffman and the bill's sponsors remain committed to finding a solution to the risks associated with genetic engineering, and will continue to work with members of the Agriculture Committee and the bill's opponents to advance the dialogue. The bill will be taken up again in January of 2008.

AB 541 has the support of all of California's sustainable, organic and family farming organizations, as well as many other groups (including: California Farmers Union, Community Alliance with Family Farmers, California Certified Organic Farmers, Center for Food Safety, Earthbound Farm, Lundberg Family Farms, Occidental Arts and Ecology Center, Rice Producers of California, California Church IMPACT, Consumers Union, Sierra Club California, Planning and Conservation League, and dozens of others). AB 541 is opposed by lobbying groups representing the interests of the chemical biotech industry and conventional industrial agribusiness.

— Genetic Engineering Policy Project —

California Certified Organic Farmers (CCOF), California Church IMPACT, Center for Environmental Health, Center for Food Safety, Community Alliance with Family Farmers, Earthbound Farm, Environment California, Good Earth Natural Foods, Oakland Institute, Occidental Arts and Ecology Center, Ocean Beach People's Organic Food Co-op, Pesticide Action Network North America, United Natural Foods Inc.

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