Santa Cruz, California: County bans biotech crops

As expected, county supervisors Tuesday approved a moratorium on growing genetically engineered crops within county lines.

The approval puts Santa Cruz County among the ranks of Trinity, Marin and Mendocino counties, which have prohibited the planting and production of such crops.

Genetically engineered crops carry transplanted genes from other species to make them more nutritious or easier to grow.

The decision drew a round of applause from about 30 people in the board's chambers. Although the crops draw controversy around the globe, no one attended Tuesday's meeting in opposition, and a look through written comments showed all were supportive of the supervisors' measure.

"It appears not to be controversial in Santa Cruz County," Supervisor Mark Stone said.

That could be because no genetically engineered crops now grow in Santa Cruz County. The biotech plants generally include corn, cotton and soybeans, not the berries and lettuce that dominate the county's harvest.

But supervisors deemed the moratorium important as companies begin researching crops grown north of the Pajaro River, like flowers, strawberries and apples.

County supervisors based their actions on findings from a nine-month study of the laws and risks associated with genetically engineered crops, which are globally growing in popularity.

However, the supervisors' move could be rendered moot if a state bill passes that strips local jurisdictions from regulating the crops.

Many farmers support SB 1056, sponsored by seed company Monsanto and introduced by Sen. Dean Florez, R-Shafter. They hope the state steps in and sets a universal standard and allows genetically engineered crops that are considered safe, said Jess Brown, executive director of Santa Cruz County Farm Bureau. Though area farmers understood why the county passed the restrictions, growers don't want be stuck navigating a patchwork of regulations as different counties allow different plants,
Brown said.

Assemblyman John Laird, D-Santa Cruz, predicted the bill would face a battle in the state Legislature.

"I think that it's going to be a dog fight," he said.

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