

Oregon County Votes to Ban GMOs

PORTLAND, Ore. (AP) — Residents in a southwest Oregon county voted emphatically to ban genetically engineered crops following a campaign that attracted a bushel of out-of-state money.



Chuck Burr stands with some red chard at his organic seed farm on May 12, 2014 outside Ashland, Ore. Fearful that genetically engineered sugar beets being grown for seed by the Swiss company Syngenta could pollinate their crops of beet and chard seed, organic farmers are asking voters to approve bans on growing genetically engineered crops in Jackson and Josephine counties. (AP Photo/Jeff Barnard)

With most of the ballots counted in Tuesday's all-mail election, Jackson County voters approved the measure by a 2-to-1 margin. A similar, lower-profile measure in neighboring Josephine County led 58 percent to 42 percent with nearly two-thirds of expected ballots counted.

Though it's a local issue, the Jackson County measure attracted national interest. A pair of competing campaigns raised \$1.3 million to sway the county's 120,000 registered voters. Nearly \$1 million of that money was raised to defeat the proposed ban.

"The voters here have many generations of fruit and vegetable growing, so they're among the most educated voters," said Chuck Burr, president of the Southern Oregon Seed Growers Association. "The opposition spent a million dollars and couldn't convince the people."

The outcome, however, won't start an immediate trend in Oregon because Gov. John Kitzhaber signed a bill last fall that prohibits local governments from regulating

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genetically engineered crops. An exception was made for Jackson County because its measure had already qualified for the ballot.

Despite the bill, opponents of GMOs in Josephine County went ahead with their own measure, saying they'll let the courts decide if the vote is valid.

Since 2004, counties in California, Hawaii and Washington state have adopted bans. In 2012, agribusiness groups defeated ballot measures in California and Washington state to require statewide GMO food labeling.

Those who opposed local government action in Oregon said rules regarding genetically modified crops should be enacted at the state or federal level, not through a patchwork of county ordinances.

Though he signed the bill, Kitzhaber directed the Oregon Department of Agriculture to map where genetically engineered and non-genetically engineered crops are grown. Moreover, he asked the department to submit a state action plan for regulating genetically engineered crops, and created a task force that will examine conflicts between growers of genetically engineered products and other producers, including organic growers.

The effort to ban GMOs in Jackson County started two years ago when organic farmers learned the Swiss company Syngenta was growing sugar beet seed in local fields that was genetically altered to resist the popular weed killer Roundup. They wanted to protect their crops from being cross-pollinated by genetically modified ones.

Though genetically engineered crops are common and no mainstream science has shown they are unsafe, opponents contend GMOs are still experimental and promote the use of pesticides. They say more testing is needed.

"This vote is going to make Jackson and Josephine county one of the most valuable seed-growing regions in the entire country, period," Burr said.

The campaign to defeat the Jackson County measure raised more than \$900,000, with most of the money coming from out-of-state donors. Three major agribusiness firms — Monsanto, Syngenta and DuPont Pioneer — combined to contribute nearly \$400,000. Supporters of the ban raised \$375,000. The leading out-of-state contributor was Dr. Bronner's Magic Soaps, which spent \$40,000.

"Regrettably ideology defeated sound science and common sense in Jackson County," Barry Bushue, president of the Oregon Farm Bureau, said in a statement. "We respect the voice of the voters, but remain convinced Measure 15-119 is bad public policy. While this election is over, this debate is not. We will continue to fight to protect the rights of all farmers to choose for themselves how they farm."

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