

## **California Senate Preserves Local Rules on Genetically Engineered Crops**

*Senate rebuffs biotech industry-sponsored play to pre-empt local democracy*

(September 1, 2006) Proponents of precautions for genetically engineered crops today declared victory in their battle to defend the rights of counties and cities to enact local restrictions on genetically engineered (GE) organisms. SB1056, a bill that would have pre-empted such local laws, failed to make it out of committee in the California Senate and died with the close of the legislative year.

The Monsanto-backed bill was introduced last year after the passage of four county and two city bans on GE crops. It was opposed by associations of cities and counties, environmentalists, organic and family farmers, and thousands of citizens concerned that it would have pre-empted democratically established local rules. California currently has no state regulations to protect farmers, consumers or the environment from the risks of GE crops.

“In the absence of statewide safeguards, local governments have stepped up to the plate and taken the precaution of restricting GE crops,” said Lisa Bunin, Ph.D., member of the Santa Cruz County Public Health Commission GE Subcommittee. “With the passage of local GE-free laws, these governments have sent a clear message that the state needs to act not only to protect the state’s diverse agriculture, but also public health and the environment.”

One of the central concerns about genetically engineered crops is contamination of the food supply by engineered varieties. Just this month, the U.S. Department of Agriculture announced that an unapproved variety of GE rice has been contaminating the U.S. rice supply for years. Japan, the E.U., and other important U.S. rice importing countries reacted immediately with bans and restrictions on long grain rice imports, shaking the rice industry and causing the rice futures market to plummet by more than \$150 million so far.

Peggy Miars, Executive Director of California Certified Organic Farmers, explains, “Organic farmers are often portrayed as the main farming sector concerned about genetic contamination. While it is true that organic markets are highly vulnerable to GE contamination, the recent rice fiasco demonstrates once again that this is an issue for all farmers, both organic and non-organic, whose customers don’t want to buy gene altered foods.”

“The rice contamination incident highlights the inadequacy of the federal GE regulatory system, and the high economic stakes involved when contamination occurs. It serves as a wake-up call to California lawmakers about the need for state legislation on GE,” stated Rebecca Spector, Center for Food Safety’s West Coast Director.

Beginning last year, the biotechnology industry pushed for similar pre-emption laws in several U.S. states, fearful that California’s model of local bans would take hold elsewhere. It has also spent decades fighting all over the world against any regulatory restrictions on experimental GE foods.

“By not even bringing SB1056 to a vote, the Senate sent a clear message that enacting pre-emption before state legislation is bad policy,” said Renata Brillinger, Director of Californians for GE-Free Agriculture. “We commend Senate leadership, and look forward to moving ahead with discussions on effective state laws to address the problems associated with genetic engineering of crops and food.”