

For Immediate Release:

September 1, 2006

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**ATTEMPT TO STRIP LOCAL AUTHORITY OVER SEEDS AND PLANTS
FAILS IN CALIFORNIA LEGISLATURE**

Communities Retain Right to Shape their Food Systems

As the 2006 California legislature came to a close, environmental and sustainable agriculture advocates breathed a sigh of relief as a controversial bill intended to strip local communities' rule over seeds and plants was defeated.

SB1056, introduced as a direct response to local governments adopting ordinances restricting the growing of genetically modified organisms (GMOs), died as the session came to an end yesterday. Since 2004, four counties (Mendocino, Trinity, Santa Cruz, and Marin) and two cities (Point Arena and Arcata) have acted to prevent the growing of genetically modified seeds. The agribusiness industry, including Monsanto and Dow AgroSciences, worried that local regulation of genetically modified crops would hamper the consolidation and expansion of intensive agriculture, have backed and supported the bill removing local authority over seeds and plants.

While stopping local initiatives to regulate genetically modified organisms was squarely the basis for SB1056, the breadth of the preemption bill and its limitation on the democratic rights of citizens created discomfort for local government organizations, community rights advocates, and legislators, as well as for environmental and farming advocates. Referring to SB1056, Senator Wesley Chesbro stated, "First and foremost, it's anti-democratic to deny local voters the right to speak." Assemblywoman Patty Berg said, "I argued against that bill and I voted against that bill because I think it's bad for California. If the counties involved in giant agribusiness want to allow GMO crops, that's their business. But they shouldn't be able to impose it on the rest of the state, especially not on counties here on the North Coast that are taking a serious look at banning this worrisome technology. Bottom line: if the people don't want it, it shouldn't be forced on them."

According to Environmental Commons Director, Britt Bailey, "I am very pleased that California's local governments will retain the right to shape their food systems. Local food systems build community, improve rural economies, and develop regional character and identity."

SB1056 is at the crux of a fierce, decade-long debate between sustainable agriculture advocates and biotechnology multinationals. Those supporting and protecting sustainable agriculture point to a lack of adequate state and federal regulations protecting foods from the detrimental effects of "genetic pollution," which occurs when an engineered gene enters another species of crop or wild plant through cross-pollination. Vern Goehring, lobbyist for the California Native Plant Society also in opposition to SB1056, affirms the rights of communities to protect their food systems, "Cross pollination from cultivated plants to wild plants is a common occurrence and science has shown that this depends on the individual crop, the wild species in the area, and local environmental conditions. Therefore, it is critical that local communities retain the ability to protect their local economies and natural resources."

In recent weeks news broke that the U.S. food supply has been contaminated with an unapproved variety of genetically engineered rice developed by Bayer Corporation. Japan, South Korea, and Europe immediately placed bans and restrictions on long grain rice imports. The contamination has caused rice futures to fall an estimated \$150 million. Californians are likely to see another legislative attempt to preempt local governments in the future. Though, for now, communities can continue to protect their environmental and farming resources.

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