

Submission to the Ann Arbor News “Your World” column for 1-30-06:

A bill scheduled to be voted on in the Senate Agriculture Committee is being watched closely by a wide range of constituents. At first glance, SB 777 doesn't seem of much import—it simply prohibits local units of governments from adopting ordinances that regulate against planting certain seeds (whether they be agricultural, vegetable, flower, or tree seeds).

But the bill is an important part of a larger battle being fought across the country: It is a response to the recent passage in California of local ordinances banning genetically engineered (GE) seeds. If passed, Michigan will join 14 other state legislatures that have adopted laws that “preempt” local control in this area.

Supporters of these preemption laws include companies that sell genetically engineered seeds, and farmers that use them. Most of the soybeans in Michigan are grown from GE seeds, as is about a third of the corn. Supporters want to avoid a patchwork of local laws that will make it harder to sell and plant GE seeds.

Those who support GE crops say they can benefit society. Reduced pesticide use, higher yields, boosted nutritional value, or foods with medicinal properties such as the ability to reduce cholesterol, are a few of the many positive attributes being sought through genetic modification.

Those who oppose SB 777 cite a growing body of research which shows unintentional negative repercussions due to GE crops. For instance, genetic contamination is appearing in plants many miles away from GE crops, due to the spread of pollen on wind currents. This has alarmed naturalists who monitor ecosystem health, and organic food growers, who must be “GE-free” to maintain their certification.

Supporters of SB 777 say that because the federal government regulates GE seeds, it is not the place of local governments to do so. But those who advocate increased caution in the testing and approval of GE seeds believe that maintaining local control is essential.

The wording of SB 777 was recently changed to allow local governments to petition the Department of Agriculture to consider an exemption—if proof of harm can be demonstrated—for their ordinances against invasive species. For instance, the City of Ann Arbor regulates against planting 136 different invasive species.

On January 23rd the Ann Arbor City Council passed a resolution opposing SB 777, on the grounds that 1) placing the burden of proof on local municipalities will make it more difficult for communities to regulate against invasives; and, 2) GE crops might contaminate nearby areas with harmful genes, such as those that kill non-target insects or that are herbicide-resistant.

Senator Liz Brater of Ann Arbor is currently the only member of the Senate Agriculture Committee opposed to this bill. If passed by the Senate, it will move on to the House Agriculture Committee.

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