

Guest Opinions “Related” To Primary PSS Tax Measures

March 25, 2014. Jonathan Spero. *Health risks of GMO crops still unknown - The GMO Debate* (Guest Opinion)

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Some myths about GMOs, and a silver lining.

First: The myth of "proven safe." Studies of GMO foods and feeds from around the world show that questions of risk to health have not been resolved. Here in the United States we are told that GMOs are known to be safe. Studies from elsewhere are mixed and seem to tell a different story.

A study in France showed that Bt toxin kills human kidney cells. A study in Egypt found abnormalities in livers, kidneys and spleens of rats fed on Bt corn. A study in Norway found high levels of glyphosate (Roundup herbicide) and its breakdown products in GMO soy. Glyphosate is actually taken up by and into the plant and can remain in the food. A study in Brazil found 32 differently expressed proteins between Mon 810 (GMO) corn and equivalent non-GMO corn.

Recently, scientists have discovered that there is a second code "hidden" in the DNA. These pieces of DNA that are moved between species contain more than one set of genetic instructions, and at least one of these sets is new to science. This simply points out how little we actually know.

Second: The myth of "substantial equivalence." Regulatory agencies in the United States base their GMO food safety testing requirements on what is called "substantial equivalence." The concept is that if a new food is substantially the same as an already existing food, it can be treated the same way as the existing food with respect to safety testing. This designation has allowed GMOs to bypass the more thorough testing required of "new" foods.

Several studies are finding differences between GMO crops and their non-GMO counterparts. These differences may have impact on human and animal health. Current U.S. testing requirements are not adequate to evaluate the safety issues inherent in genetic modification. Nations that require more stringent testing, and tests not funded by the patent holder who stands to benefit, do not seem to be moving toward approving GMOs.

Genetic engineering is a process, not a product. Some GMOs may prove to be harmless or beneficial, while others may cause harm. Any food source modified by insertion of unrelated genes needs to be tested as a new food. Genetic modification can cause substantial, unpredictable and uncontrollable changes in the modified plant or animal and its offspring.

I urge everyone to vote in favor of a ban on planting of GMO crops in the Rogue Valley. There are also some myths out there about the impact of a GMO planting ban. First is that it will mean higher taxes. Counties set budgets and priorities and enforcement authorities do what they can with the funds they are given. Nothing in these rules mandates higher taxes.

A second myth is that a ban on GMOs only benefits organic farmers. Passing these measures would mean buyers could have confidence that all Rogue Valley products are GMO-free.

GMOs are not going away. Spraying is often cheaper than cultivating, especially at larger scales. Bigger monocultures are possible with less labor using pesticide tolerant plants. A farmer can farm thousands of acres. GMO farming has been profitable, at least in some crops and in some places.

The Rogue Valley doesn't have farms with thousands of acres. Our valley cannot compete in the market for low price commodities. What we do have is a dedicated core of specialty or organic farmers and smaller farms that are able to produce the highest quality of food, wine, seed and other products

The demand for GMO-free food is not going away. It will be a long time before we know which, if any, genetic modifications are of real value and which carry risk or cause harm. In the meantime, the Rogue Valley can provide quality GMO-free products to those who want them. A premium price for Rogue Valley products would be the silver lining of the GMO cloud.

New GMO plant types are being released each year. Soon, restricting them from our valley will be impossible. Now is the time to say "not here" to GMO crops.

Jonathan Spero grows vegetable seed in the Applegate Valley.