

Local control won't work for seed and crop rules

By George Grier and Arnie Roblan

From the Desk of
Representative
Val Hoyle



Senate Bill 633 is a common-sense measure that simply states that the regulation of seed and seed crops is the provenance of the state, not of local jurisdictions. It does not mention, deregulate, promote or specifically deal with genetically modified organisms, or GMOs.

The bill was poised for approval during the regular legislative session this year and was pulled at the last minute, in spite of having passed the Senate and having sufficient votes to pass in the House.

Why is it important? Many Oregonians have expressed concern about GMOs — enough to foster a variety of reactions. One reaction has been initiatives to regulate GMO production at a local level. While these actions may come with the best intentions, they have become a serious issue in the agricultural community for a variety of reasons.

Farmers are not necessarily against seed regulation. In fact, one of their primary concerns is that seed regulation has become so extraordinarily complex that no local jurisdiction has the resources to monitor and enforce it. When our county cannot find the money to keep our jail open, how could it possibly take on this important task?

Local jurisdictions cannot enforce the wind, the birds or the bees. There is growing concern, both among consumers and farmers, about crop contamination from unwanted cross-pollination. But Mother Nature does not respect county lines, and however well-intentioned a local ordinance might be to prevent unwanted crop contamination, ultimately this issue has to be addressed at a much broader level. SB 633 provides the state the authority to take on this task.

If you are an advocate of local control, consider an alternate scenario. Consider what would happen if Linn County adopted local control, and specifically allowed Roundup-ready canola (brassica rapa). There are more than a dozen brassica species, like wild mustard, that these crops could potentially cross pollinate with which could soon be crossing the county border. Local control is a flawed ideal in this complicated situation.

Under Oregon law, farmers have the right to choose what crops and farm production methods work best for them. Oregonians have also chosen to specifically protect our farm and forest lands through our statewide land use laws. This statewide approach has worked well for Oregon and her economy, where agricultural products continue to be among the most important traded sectors.

It is important that this continue. Making seed regulation a statewide issue and devoting sufficient state resources to carry out this mandate will play an important role in the future of agriculture in Oregon.

Why has the issue of GMOs gotten so many people agitated? People care about what they eat. The recent discovery of rogue GMO wheat in Oregon has heightened this concern. People also have a right to choose what they eat. They can choose what is most affordable or most available or whatever their budget or standards require.

However, a local jurisdiction cannot control what people eat. Local initiatives are not going to keep food containing GMOs out a particular county, because that is beyond county officials' control. So the issue really boils down to what is grown in the county, and whether there might be adverse impacts from those crops. Most of these possible impacts come down to potential cross-pollination. Some species cross-pollinate easily, some don't. There are many legitimate reasons to avoid unwanted cross-pollination. Organic growers have a right to protect their crops and livelihoods. So do the many commercial seed growers in the Willamette Valley.

This is a serious and complicated issue. But local regulation is not the answer because it won't work. There is neither the technical expertise, the enforcement ability nor the resources. The Legislature should attend to this piece of unfinished business and approve SB 633 in the special session that opens today.

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