

The Natural Farmer

Farmers Made the Difference in Vermont Town Meeting Votes Against GMOs - Summer 2002

By Sandy Snyder, Westfield, Vermont

For years the public and social organizations in Vermont have been speaking out about Genetically Modified Organisms (GMOs), while some conventional farmers continued to maintain they should be permitted to plant GMO seeds. It was a stalemate.

No one thing was the magic bullet that led to change in Vermont, but here is a list of some of the things I know about:

- Social change organizations are loosely connected and share information with each other. For example - Hunger Mountain Coop (food store) cooperated with Rural Vermont (a farmers' organization) to identify which foods sold in the Coop were GMO-free.
- Vermont Genetic Engineering Action Network (GEAN) is organized specifically to focus on the GMO issue.
- Multiple organizations, including NOFA-VT, invited Dr. Margaret Mellon of the Union of Concerned Scientists to come and speak about GMOs at the Vermont State House. Dr. Mellon called for large sections of the country to be "GMO-free" so we do not lose our older seed varieties from cross-pollination.
- Complaint was made to Hunger Mountain Coop that Roundup inhibits three essential amino acids needed by humans and cows. Humans and cows can not manufacture these amino acids, but must get them from their food supply. Someone found out and wrote a humorous article in the local newspaper about this and other issues regarding the coop.
- Monsanto initiated law suits in Canada, the US, and elsewhere against farmers who never planted GMO seeds, but had GMO genes in their crops from cross-pollination. Monsanto claims they "own" the genes and farmers must pay regardless of how the genes got there.
- Monsanto developed "technology agreements" which are contracts farmers must sign when they buy GMO seeds. The maximum amount farmers can collect from Monsanto if the seeds fail is the cost of the seeds.
- The Farm Bureau and the Vermont Grocers Association continue to support use of GMOs.

- NOFA-VT, Rural Vermont, Vermont GEAN, The Institute for Social Ecology and others got together and developed a Town by Town campaign asking most especially that farmers tell their local governments they favored no GMOs.
- Collectively the organizations developed:
 - a. a sample petition
 - b. a list of state newspapers and information on how to write articles
 - c. ideas for how to word local petitions
 - d. legal guidelines for how to get the petitions included on town meeting agendas
 - e. four or five "reprints" of articles explaining issues surrounding GMOs.
- Rural Vermont, an organization which serves many conventional farmers, began writing quality newsletters about farm economics, mad cow disease, and problems farmers face when planting GMOs.
- NOFA-VT and others wrote informative articles about GMOs in their newsletters and asked farmers to contact government officials and told how to get petition packets.
- Letters about GMOs were sent to local papers by local people
- In Westfield (my town), a petition was circulated and filed on time. Then the town farmers, both conventional and organic, had a public meeting prior to town meeting day. This was written about in two local newspapers.
- On town meeting day, town officials were worried they could not "enforce" a moratorium. So the wording was changed from "town selectmen shall declare a moratorium" to "citizens shall declare a moratorium". This passed on a voice vote.
- 31 Vermont towns discussed GMOs on town meeting day (March 5). 28 passed resolutions against genetic engineering. Two towns tabled the resolutions and one rejected it. Four Vermont towns already had resolution in place from last year. According to the Institute for Social Ecology, ten other municipalities in the US are also on record as being against GMOs.

Persons who would like information about a sample petition packet should contact the Institute for Social Ecology Biotechnology Project, 118 Maple Hill Rd., Plainfield, VT 05667, (802) 454-7137, info@nerage.org

For copies of the newsletters written by Rural Vermont call (802) 223-7222 or write 15 Barre St., Montpelier, VT 05602.