

## Testimony to the Massachusetts Senate and House Joint Agriculture Committee

AMHERST - Dozens of farmers and consumers from around the state gathered in Amherst Monday to deliver testimony to the Massachusetts Senate and House joint agriculture committee on a range of bills related to farming. One bill would cut off further participation of Massachusetts in a controversial federal animal tracking program that critics call costly and unnecessary. Another bill would enact a moratorium on growing genetically engineered (GE) crops until ecological and health dangers were overcome. People came from as far as Essex and Plymouth counties and even Washington DC to testify in a hot room at the UMASS campus. Many testified on both bills, and the testimony was overwhelmingly in support.

Small farmers who attended the hearing spoke in favor of bills filed by representative Anne Gobi and Senator Steve Brewer to cut off funding for the National Animal Identification System (NAIS), saying its new regulations would threaten their livelihoods.

Lenore Paul, a poultry farmer and public school teacher in Ludlow explained that because of her farm's small scale, animals often escape from caging and get eaten by predators. "By requiring me to track my animals, I would be spending all my time accounting for lost animals and making reports on the computer. This burden would put me out of business."

Cynda Williams, an organic chicken farmer in Acushnet said, "The freedom to farm should be a given in a free country. If we cannot farm without Big Brother looking at what, how and where we do our farming, where is the freedom?"

Ben Grosscup of Amherst has organized meetings all around Massachusetts to educate about NAIS with the Northeast Organic Farming Association. He said, "by withdrawing Massachusetts' support for NAIS, we will both protect our farmers and change the national debate on NAIS. It will send the message that NAIS gives consumers no useful information on where their meat comes from. It only gives corporate agribusiness a false stamp of approval they can use to secure foreign markets, while putting small-scale local farmers out of business."

Representative Gobi, a member of the house committee that conducted the hearing said, "This bill will help protect sustainable farming. When this bill was filed, many legislators who don't have agriculture in their districts signed onto it, because they recognized that we all benefit from agriculture and also because they don't like the idea of government acting as Big Brother."

An equal number of people came to the hearing to advocate for the moratorium proposed by Representative Ellen Story. Their testimony highlighted the threats of GE crops to the environment, public health, and local and organic agriculture.

Amy Pulley who runs the Cummington Creamery testified that a moratorium would protect her business and the surrounding community. When she and her partner began running the store seven years ago, they thought that they could just serve their community by making good food, but learned that actually doing this is much more complicated. "When people ask me whether there are GE ingredients in our food, I have to tell them that I don't know, because they are not labeled," said Pulley. "I don't rest easy about this, because I don't believe in the safety of GE foods. Organic is the only way we can be sure that food is GE-free, so a huge percentage of what we sell is organic, and we are increasingly sourcing it locally. This means our business relies on thriving local farms that are free of GE contamination."

Senior researcher at the Union of Concerned Scientists in Washington, DC, Jane Rissler, testified that planting food crops like corn and soy that are genetically engineered to produce pharmaceuticals and industrial chemicals is dangerous. Although they have not yet been grown in Massachusetts, Rissler's group has documented how even test plots of pharma crops can contaminate the food supply. The hearing addressed committee chair representative Frank Smizik's bill to prevent such test plots until regulations have been made to prevent contamination. When Smizik asked Rissler how she thought the bill could be improved, she said, "I would urge you to call for a ban on the outdoor production of food crops that produce drugs or industrial chemicals."

Warren Chamberlain of the Massachusetts State Grange said, "The real question at stake with genetic engineering is who decides what's in our food? Do the twenty-five Massachusetts towns that have voted to support a moratorium on GE crops get to decide? Or, are we going to give that choice over to the big biotech companies that are profiting from this technology."

Emily Stockman, who is receiving a doctorate in soil science at UMASS, said that biological activity in soil is ecologically essential for growing food and for life itself, but that there are major concerns about how GE crops are harming soil biodiversity. "Until the effects of GE crops are thoroughly researched and answered, we should have a moratorium on growing them."

Matthew Biskup from Ware said that, "We're proud to be family farmers and to provide healthy food to the people. Now the people have come here to say we want these bills to stop NAIS and stem the spread of GE crops so that we can protect our food supply."

Supporters of the bills on GE crops also supported bills requiring GE seeds to be sold with the label "genetically engineered" so that Massachusetts farmers will be certain about what they are buying. Following the hearing, the next step for is for the joint committee to meet in executive session and make recommendations on the bills.

For press material on town meeting votes against genetic engineering see:

<http://pressroom.nofamass.org/taxonomy/term/76>

For the latest info on efforts in Massachusetts to stop NAIS see:

<http://pressroom.nofamass.org/taxonomy/term/66>