

Ag Giants Spend Big to Defeat Labeling Initiative

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SAN FRANCISCO (AP) — The nation's largest agribusiness and biotech companies are pouring millions of dollars into California to stop the first-ever initiative to require special labels on foods made with genetically modified ingredients, a sign of their determination to keep the measure from sparking a nationwide movement.

So far, farming giants such as Monsanto, Dupont Pioneer and Cargill have contributed nearly \$25 million to defeat the proposal, with much of that cash coming in the past few days. It's nearly 10 times the amount raised by backers of the ballot measure who say California's health-conscious shoppers want more information about the food they eat.

With nearly three months to go before the November election, the measure's opponents appear to be following the previous blueprint developed by major industries to defeat ballot initiatives in the nation's largest consumer market: Raise large sums of money to swamp the airwaves with negative advertising.

The tactic previously worked for the pharmaceutical industry. And in California's June primary, the tobacco industry helped defeat an initiative supported by cycling legend Lance Armstrong that would have raised cigarette taxes to fund cancer research.

The food initiative, known as Proposition 37, is one of 11 statewide measures to go before California voters in November. It would require most processed foods to bear a label by 2014 letting shoppers know if the items contain ingredients derived from plants with DNA altered with genes from other plants, animals, viruses or bacteria.

If the proposal passes, California would be the first state to require labeling of such a wide range of foods containing genetically modified organisms, or GMOs.

It also could force a major production shift in the industry, given that Californians eat about 12 percent of all food consumed in the U.S., said Daniel Sumner, an agricultural economist at the University of California, Davis.

Supporters of similar legislation in more than a dozen states say the intent is to give consumers more information about what they are eating and to foster transparency and trust in the food system.

"It's an epic food fight between the pesticide companies and consumers who want to know what's in their food," said Stacy Malkan, media director for the California Right to Know campaign, which by Monday had amassed about \$2.4 million to promote the initiative, largely from consumer advocates, organic farmers, organic food manufacturers and health food retailers.

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Major agricultural groups and the processed food industry oppose stricter labeling, saying it risks sowing fear and confusion among shoppers. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration has said genetically engineered crops, or GE crops, pose no greater health risks than traditional foods.

The latest influx of cash seeking to defeat Proposition 37 puts the coalition of farming groups, food producers, pesticide companies and taxpayer organizations in a good position to fund media and mailers saying that grocery bills would increase if the initiative succeeds, said Kathy Fairbanks, spokeswoman for the No on 37 campaign.

Monsanto, the largest contributor, gave \$4.2 million this week.

"Everyone is impacted because everyone buys groceries, and one of the impacts is going to be higher grocery bills," Fairbanks said. "Prop. 37 leaves consumers with the incorrect impression that there is something wrong with GE crops, when that is not true."

Opponents also said new labeling rules could pose a future burden on taxpayers if Californians have to pay more for state inspectors to verify that labels are appropriately applied, and could leave the state open to lawsuits.

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