

San Juan Islands' 2012 ban on GMOs: Incubator for debate

In 2012, a humble farmer in the off-the-beaten-track archipelago of the San Juan Islands fired a shot in the form of a citizen initiative.

The subject: GMOs, or genetically modified organisms, and the crops grown from them. Little San Juan County, with its 12,019 registered voters, passed the initiative banning the growing of GMO crops on its islands.

The topic stokes passions. Depending on who's talking, either GMOs will save the world from climate change and feed humanity — all 9.6 billion of us, [as projected by 2050](#) — or they'll corrupt the natural order and bring the "Silent Spring" that much sooner. Both sides have their street cred.

When Lopez Islander Ken Akopiantz filed his San Juan County initiative in 2012, he just wanted to protect the purity of bucolic spreads such as his Horse Drawn Farm, reached down a long, wild rose-lined gravel drive off lonely Port Stanley Road.

He doesn't rant about GMO foods causing two-headed babies. He worries about practical issues, such as what happens if GMO crops are grown next door and spread into his field, corrupting foods he aims to sell as natural or organic?

He has reason to worry. Akopiantz drew his inspiration from Saskatchewan canola farmer Percy Schmeiser's 2011 visit to Lopez. Schmeiser became a crusader for anti-GMO independent farmers when he locked horns in the late 1990s with Monsanto over patent infringement when he saved seed—likely cross-pollinated with his neighbor's seed—from his crop and replanted it.

In San Juan County, as the GMO-ban election approached, one challenge was finding anybody to write [the "con" message for the local voter's guide](#).

"The county had to advertise to find someone," Akopiantz says.

But it turned out this retirement haven was a natural incubator for debate on the subject. Two former CEOs of genetic-engineering companies co-authored the "con" message. One, Roger Salquist, was CEO in the 1980s and '90s of a biotech pioneer called [Calgene](#), the firm that produced the first commercially grown genetically engineered food to be granted a license for human consumption: the rot-resistant Flavr Savr tomato, brought to market in 1994.

The other "con" author, Larry Soll, headed a pharmacology-oriented biotech absorbed by Amgen in the 1990s.

Their statement said “virtually no” GMO species are grown in the county, noted that sophisticated DNA analysis to distinguish GMOs can’t be performed on the islands (their opponents challenge that), and extolled the virtues of GMOs, including pest resistance, nutritive value, drought tolerance and adaptability to saline or alkaline soils.

The citizens, unswayed, delivered a 62 percent “yes” vote.

But there are what you might call forward thinkers among the ban’s backers.

Read full, original article: [Little San Juan County takes on the GMO goliaths](#)