

Openness and transparency are allegedly the foundations of a democratic, free-market society, but last Thursday the House of Representatives voted 275 to 150 to pass H.R. 1599, the so called “Safe and Accurate Food Labeling Act” better known to the opposition as the “DARK Act” (Deny Americans the Right to Know).

The bill forbids states from labeling GMO foods and nullifies any existing state labeling laws. It also prohibits any local government oversight of GMO crops and allows GMOs to be labeled as “natural.” In my opinion that last sentence is the real meat of the bill as far as our North Coast community is concerned.

Last November Humboldt voted overwhelmingly in favor of Measure P, creating a GMO-free production zone to protect our growing organic agricultural base. As the DARK act was originally presented to the full House of Representatives our local oversight would have been toast. Fortunately, thanks to Jared Huffman and others, that part of the provision was struck from the bill. So, for now, we are safe but it will go to the Senate soon, which will presumably require more activism on our part if we want to maintain local food sovereignty.

By the way, Mr. Huffman proposed an amendment that would ensure tribal sovereignty to prohibit or restrict the cultivation of genetically engineered plants on tribal lands but I don’t know if it was added to the resolution.

Another amendment presented by a representative from Connecticut would prohibit the use of the term “natural” on food when it contains GMOs. I don’t know if that was accepted either.

Let’s analyze that word “natural” and see where it could and probably is taking us. “Natural” is a marketing word for conventional chemical agriculture that may or may not contain

genetically engineered ingredients. Foods labeled GMO free (unless they are organic or sustainably produced) are just made from conventionally grown crops using the “normal” slew of chemicals; they just do not contain any ingredients from the genetic engineering process.

If it is accepted that a genetically engineered plant is no different than conventionally bred organisms – natural – then how could it be prevented from being cultivated or raised using organic farming practices? Presently almost all genetically engineered crops on the market either produce their own pesticide or resist the effects of herbicides so this would not be possible under the present Organic Standards Board rules but rules have a funny way of being bent to satisfy large industrial type farming whether it is organic or conventional.

This is not just about GMOs this is about democracy and transparency. Even the Campaign for Liberty, founded by Ron Paul, issued a statement recently opposing HR 1599 (the DARK act) on the basis that it violates the U.S. Constitution.