Transition Plan for Phasing Out Genetically-Engineered Crops on Boulder County Parks and Open Space Properties

Background

On March 17, 2016, the Board of County Commissioners (BOCC) directed Boulder County Parks and Open Space (BCPOS) staff to develop a plan that would phase out the use of genetically-engineered (GE) crops – specifically, glyphosate-resistant corn and sugar beets -- on the county's open space properties. The BOCC also expressed concerns about pesticide use on open space properties, and their support for increased research opportunities into sustainable agriculture. After input from agricultural tenants and other stakeholders, staff has developed this draft transition plan to eliminate the use of these GE crops on county property while minimizing the impact on our lessees whose livelihoods are connected with the agricultural stewardship of these lands.

Phasing out the use of GE crops will have an impact on the business investments and operations of the farms currently approved for use of GE crops; however, the specific impacts will depend on the crops grown and current crop rotation sequences. For example, sugar beets, which are only available commercially as seeds in their GE form, require specialized equipment and membership in a cooperative—both significant financial investments. Sugar beets are one of the most dependable and profitable crops for farmers in this region and provide some tenants with as close to a guaranteed income as possible given the vagaries of agricultural commodities and markets. In the case of corn, the situation is different. Unlike sugar beets, there is a readily available substitute non-GE crop. A tenant can more easily make a switch from GE corn to conventional corn (or transition to organic) and would likely continue to use some of the same equipment.

Staff recognizes that these switches are not without impacts and could result in added inputs, more costs, and decreased yields for our tenants. With these impacts and crop differences in mind, staff worked to develop a general transition plan that addresses the situation from a broad perspective, taking advantage of the unique circumstances of each lease, each crop, and the existing rotation protocols in the Cropland Policy.

Proposed Plan

Our goal is to reduce, and ultimately eliminate, the use of GE crops on county open space in a way that is understandable and fair for affected tenants. To do so, staff has suggested a dual strategy that will phase out GE crops based on the differences described above between corn and sugar beets:

1. GE corn will be allowed in rotations for the next three years (beginning in 2017), resulting in a complete phase out by the end of 2019.

2. GE sugar beets will be allowed in rotations for the next five years (beginning in 2017), resulting in a complete phase out by the end of 2021.

This dual strategy will result in a dramatic reduction in GE crop use in the near term since corn generally represents 70% of the total GE acreage, accounting for approximately 1,200 acres annually on average. Furthermore, the longer time for beet conversion gives tenants added time to utilize the investments made by tenants.

In addition, only tenants who have been approved to plant GE crops will be allowed to continue use of GE seeds during this phase-out period. We propose:

- limiting the continued planting of GE crops to tenants who have planted GE corn or sugar beets in the last two years (2015 and 2016);
- capping future plantings of GE corn and sugar beets at a maximum acreage-per-crop-per-tenant based on the maximum acreage planted over the last four years (the planting timeframe since the Cropland Policy was approved in late 2011); and
- limiting plantings of either GE crop to a maximum of two times total per tenant according to the existing protocols of the Cropland Policy.

Limiting GE crop use to the leased areas that have had GE crops on them within the last two years will also aid our efforts to monitor and track GE crop use and be a fair method for allocating GE crop acreage.

To implement the GE transition effectively, the proposed plan includes several additional components to protect the viability of agriculture in Boulder County during and after the implementation of this transition plan:

1. Assist tenants with GE leases. While the draft transition plan lays out specific guidelines for curtailing GE crop planting over the next 3-5 years that will apply uniformly to all tenants, each tenant's situation is unique. Consequently, BCPOS staff will work with each tenant on the details of transitioning by using a variety of tools and incentives to minimize the potential economic impact. This includes assisting in the development of new farm operating plans that are GE-free, identifying and promoting training opportunities and best management practices, and developing incentives for GE crop acreage reductions that occur before deadlines. Also, if tenants choose not to renew leases that have had GE crops within the last two years, BCPOS will work to purchase irrigation equipment for continued use on county agricultural properties.

2. Support agriculture in Boulder County. Another feature of this plan is to continue and expand delivery of programs that support agricultural viability in Boulder County by providing transitioning tenants with alternative agricultural opportunities. Specifically, staff will continue to research and develop value-added products and new markets, deliver county capital improvement programs for irrigation infrastructure and other facility improvements, and offer organic incentives by staffing an organic weed crew, reducing rent during organic transitions, and introducing a new staff position to assist with organic certification.

3. Enhance data collection and monitoring. During the hearings on this topic earlier in 2016, some of the public expressed concerns that the county wasn't capturing or sharing important

agricultural land and resource information. Since the adoption of the Cropland Policy in 2011, BCPOS staff has tracked acreage in GE and organic cropping systems as well as detailed revenue and costs for crop share leases. BCPOS has also monitored key natural resource characteristics on farm properties, including soil health and fertility, water quality/quantity, and the presence of pollinators and pesticide residues. However, the department recognizes that this program can be improved upon and be more effective by engaging additional technical review and support. We are committed to thoroughly reviewing our existing data collection and monitoring efforts and adopting new metrics and protocols that will capture and deliver more relevant information to both tenants and the public.

4. Launch a new sustainable agriculture initiative. Staff proposes to create the Boulder County Ag Research Innovation Initiative that will explore key sustainable agriculture questions to both sustain Boulder County agriculture and help advance our goal to be a national leader in sustainable agriculture. Research priorities will explore local questions related to environmentally sensitive agricultural production that is balanced with farm economics. BCPOS is positioned to provide land and water resources and staff time to support this initiative. Boulder County Parks and Open Space and CSU Extension in Boulder County will facilitate project development with Rodale Institute and CSU Agricultural Sciences and engage partner agencies, organizations, and stakeholders. This project is envisioned to provide local farmers with research and demonstration plots that can be used to inform local agricultural practices to increase their sustainability metrics.

Conclusion

Staff views this plan as the starting point in the transition away from GE crops. Our immediate focus will be on implementing this plan in the most just and fair manner possible. We will work diligently with affected tenants in hopes that they remain our trusted stewards of these lands and continue our agricultural heritage in this county. BCPOS staff believes that there is broad community support for our agricultural program. Staff and our tenants understand the critical importance of conserving soil and water resources. Indeed, a number of our tenants come from families that have farmed in this area for generations and have conserved their lands permanently through conservation easements. We also appreciate the interest the citizens of Boulder County take in public land agriculture and their concern for its impacts on natural resources. This proposed transition plan acknowledges all of these perspectives and continues our efforts to keep agriculture sustainable in Boulder County.

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