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Bill banning GMO taro introduced by councilor

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County Council Member Bill Medeiros has introduced a bill banning genetically engineered or modified taro in Maui County.

The proposal received strong support Friday from Native Hawaiians, taro farmers and critics of GMO technology when it was introduced at the regular Maui County Council meeting. It was referred to committee for future discussion.

Proponents of developing genetically modified taro have said research could help the plant resist modern pests and diseases.

But critics said genetic experimentation still hasn't been proved to be safe, and natural strains of the plant could be contaminated through pollination. They also point out taro's cultural and spiritual significance to Hawaiians.

"That's sacred," said taro farmer Alex Bode. "Leave our taro alone."

The environmental issues affecting taro farmers won't be solved by genetic modification, he added.

"It's a sacred, perfect food," said advocate Angie Hoffman. "It just needs good soil and water."

She added that there haven't been enough studies done to show genetic modification is safe.

Maui Nui Botanical Gardens Executive Director Lisa Schattenberg-Raymond said developing genetically modified strains of taro would create a "Pandora's box" because farmers couldn't prevent the new types from cross-pollinating with their pure, traditional varieties.

"Any genetic modification of kalo (taro) is a threat to Native Hawaiian resources," she said.

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