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## U.S. Pushes Genetically Modified Crops in Guatemala

by Mike Leffert

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A birthplace of heirloom corn varieties, Guatemala is a vital center for the survival of Mesoamerica's traditional maize culture. Conversely, the small Central American nation is increasingly viewed by some as a possible pivotal producer in the biotech-driven agriculture of the 21st century. Promoted and encouraged by the administration of US President George W. Bush, transgenic-crop proponents are stepping up their efforts to turn Guatemala into a haven for genetically modified (GM) crops.

Several developments favor their prospects, including the international energy crisis, the move to substitute petroleum-derived gasoline for ethanol fuel made from corn and sugarcane, and the worldwide spike in corn prices. Biotech-agriculture's boosters argue that the crops are environmentally safe, require less chemical usage, and increase productivity.

Mario Melgar, director of the Centro Guatemalteco de Investigacion de la Cana de Azucar (CENGICANA), says that agricultural-industry leaders are studying the possibility of planting GM sugarcane on about 607,030 hectares near both the Mexican and Honduran borders. If the project unfolds as envisioned, it would not only boost Guatemala's area of planted sugarcane by nearly three times but significantly expand the geographic scope of the crop as well. The country now has 14 active refineries and 207,200 ha of sugarcane planted on the southern Pacific Coast.

Whether with sugarcane or corn, a transition to large-scale GM-based agriculture in Guatemala still faces an array of national and international obstacles. Citing lingering questions about the long-term effects of genetically modified organisms in food, critics contend that GM crops will contaminate native species as well as expose humans and animals to health risks.

Ronnie Palacios, an activist with the Guatemalan environmental organization Asociacion para la Promocion y el Desarrollo de la Comunidad (CEIBA), casts doubt on assurances that GM crops will lead to less chemical use, and he cautions against the adverse effects of corn or sugarcane monoculture. Contamination fears based on fact Fears of GM-contaminated native crops are more than just hypothetical in Guatemala.

Five years ago, the US-based environmental organization Friends of the Earth (FOE) documented the presence of a genetically modified corn called StarLink in aid packages sent to Guatemala by the US Agency for International Development (USAID) and the UN World Food Program (WFP). In 2005, a follow-up FOE study found 80% of 77 Guatemalan corn samples were contaminated by GM corn. The findings alarmed some Guatemalans.

Corn tortillas are a basic food staple for indigenous Guatemalans, and the corn plant holds a central place in the cosmology of the Mayan people. "They are like our bodies red for blood, yellow for skin, white for bones, and blue/black for our hair," said Mayan Don Pablo Botzoc of the different native-

corn varieties that have evolved in the special climatic conditions of the Guatemalan landscape through the centuries.

International food-safety politics are putting something of a brake on the more rapid spread of GM crops in Guatemala. The nation is a signatory to the 2003 Cartagena Protocol, an international agreement ratified by 141 countries, which requires examining a full range of environmental, health, and socioeconomic factors before plunging full speed ahead with transgenic agriculture. The global pact jibes with the posture of the European Union (EU), whose rules mandate a two-year to ten-year waiting period before new GM products are approved. The US, which is not a signatory to the Cartagena Protocol, maintains a quicker 15-month approval process for GM products.

Concretely, the EU is promoting the Cartagena Protocol and the go-slow approach through the UN Environmental Program (UNEP) and the Global Environmental Fund (GEP). The joint program provides a regulatory framework for nations seeking to draft and implement biosafety rules under the Cartagena Protocol. Washington, however, is actively opposing implementation of EU/UN-inspired GM-crop regulations for Guatemala.

### *Washington opposes EU regulations*

Since 2005, the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) has successfully lobbied against what the agency considers restrictive Guatemalan biosafety rules. Washington argues that the measures as they stand would violate the World Trade Organization (WTO) rules, impair US grain sales, and unnecessarily constrain transgenic farming. In Guatemala, the US position is supported by the agribusiness sector and the official Consejo Nacional de Ciencia y Tecnologia (CONCYT).

As Guatemalans prepare for another presidential transition (see NotiCen, 2007-09-13), transgenic agriculture advocates are intensifying their campaign to make sure that the next administration is a decidedly GM-friendly one. Earlier this month, the USDA and CONCYT co-sponsored a visit to Guatemala by Dr. Hector Flores, a Yale University biology graduate and the dean of sciences at Texas State University-San Marcos.

On his visit, Dr. Flores met with hundreds of government officials, agricultural-industry representatives, academics, and students of the Valle, San Carlos, and Francisco Marroquin universities. Extolling the purported benefits of biotechnology and GM agriculture, Dr. Flores pointed to the US, Canada, Brazil, and Argentina as countries benefiting from the new farming model. He told Guatemalans that such countries are now experiencing higher production and better competitiveness because of their introduction of GM crops.

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