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## **Campaign Seeks to Halt Imports of Genetically Modified Corn from U.S.**

*by LADB Staff*

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Prominent environmental organizations Greenpeace Mexico and Grupo de los Cien have begun a campaign to halt the import of genetically modified corn from the US, which they claim threatens Mexico's agricultural diversity and the endangered monarch butterfly.

A large percentage of the US corn exports to Mexico originate in the Midwest, where many farmers use seeds that have been genetically modified to produce a natural pesticide to repel the European corn borer. This variety is known as Bt corn, for its scientific name *Bacillus thuringiensis*.

Mexican environmental groups have raised concerns that the Bt corn will cross-pollinate with Mexican corn, which could endanger the integrity of more than 300 Mexican corn varieties. "Our very lives for millennia have come from the seeds that nature gives us," Grupo de los Cien president Homero Aridjis told The Dallas Morning News. "You start altering these seeds, and you don't know what's going to happen."

Aridjis decried the inadequate protections in the North American Free Trade Association (NAFTA), which fail to control imports of biologically altered food products. "We can be punished through the very food we eat," he said. Furthermore, the environmental groups claim the genetically altered corn has developed a strong resistance to normal herbicides, which could force some farmers in Mexico to use more powerful chemicals that could damage the environment.

### ***Altered corn may harm monarch butterfly***

The controversy surrounding the genetically modified corn has also involved the monarch butterfly, which migrates across Canada, the US, and Mexico and is considered by some a symbol of NAFTA. Monarch butterflies migrate south in the winter months to sanctuaries in Michoacan and Mexico states. A recent study conducted by Cornell University in New York showed that pollen from the genetically altered corn could kill the larvae of monarch butterflies if ingested. Environmental groups are concerned that the pollen could become trapped in milkweed, a common food for monarch butterfly larvae.

Seed companies, however, have dismissed the claims of the Mexican environmental organizations. Tony Minnichsoffer, a spokesman for the US seed-marketing subsidiary of the Swiss-based food giant Novartis, said corn imported from the US poses no danger to the butterflies because it is no longer pollinating. Furthermore, he said, Mexico has little or no problem with the European corn borer, so there would be no reason to plant this variety.

Minnichsoffer also disputed the claims that imported Bt corn could cross-pollinate with native varieties. This process can only be done by trained scientists, he said. "When we encounter what

we consider unfounded fears by people who say that [we are] releasing something negative into the environment, it's hard to understand," Minnichsoffer said. Still, the environmental groups are continuing their campaign against the genetically modified corn.

Following the lead of their counterparts in Europe, members of Greenpeace Mexico have held public protests to bring attention to their concerns about Bt corn imports. Greenpeace members in Germany have convinced their government to ban the sale of a popular US candy bar manufactured with a byproduct of bio-tech corn.

Greenpeace Mexico organized a massive demonstration in front of the Secretaria de Agricultura, Ganaderia y Desarrollo Rural (SAGAR) to protest Agriculture Secretary Romarico Arroyo Marroquin's decision to allow the imports of genetically modified corn. "We accuse Romarico Arroyo of being in complicity with the large multinationals that hope to take control of and dominate the corn industry," a Greenpeace spokesperson said at the protest held in mid-September. This is at least the second time this year the administration's corn-import policies have been questioned in a public forum.

Earlier in the month, members of the Chamber of Deputies and Senate criticized Trade Secretary Herminio Blanco for allowing duty-free corn imports from the US to exceed even the quotas specified under NAFTA. The imports, they said, are depressing prices in Mexico and forcing many farmers out of business (see SourceMex, 1999-09-29).

### *Commission to study impact of bio-tech products*

The concerns raised by Greenpeace, Grupo de los Cien, and other environmental groups have attracted the attention of the administration, although not the desired restrictions on imports of genetically modified corn. Earlier this year, President Ernesto Zedillo requested the creation of a "bio-security" commission to study bio-tech products and recommend possible legislation. Some administration officials appear to share the concerns of the environmental groups.

Amada Valdez, SAGAR's director of services and technical assistance, said her office has rejected all applications dealing with the study of genetically altered corn. "The main problem for the cultivation of [genetically altered corn] is the risk of genetic flow from the altered variety to related species," Valdez told the weekly newspaper *El Financiero Internacional*. But Ricardo Celma, who heads the Central America and Mexico office at the US Feed Grains Council, said genetic engineering could help create products that benefit consumers. He said some US companies expect to receive approval shortly to market a corn variety that is high in protein and low in phosphorus.

In the future, he said, corn production could also be targeted to meet the specific needs of the starch, tortilla, and animal-feed industries. Celma said the US food industry is already using genetically altered seeds to grow corn, soybeans, tomatoes, cucumbers, and strawberries. "The average American is consuming genetically altered foods," said Celma. He said all these foods have been rigorously tested for safety by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), the Federal Grain Inspection Service, and other agencies. (Sources: Spanish news service EFE, 09/14/99; Reuters, 09/14/99; *El Financiero Internacional*, 09/20/99; *The Dallas Morning News*, 10/03/99)

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