NAFTA Commission Warns About Presence of GMOs in Mexican Corn

LADB Staff
NAFTA Commission Warns About Presence of GMOs in Mexican Corn

by LADB Staff
Category/Department: Mexico
Published: 2004-03-17

Researchers from the Montreal-based Commission on Environmental Cooperation (CEC), an agency created through the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), have joined nongovernmental organizations in raising a red flag about the introduction of genetically modified (GM) corn into Mexico. Environmental organizations like Greenpeace and Grupo de los Cien have long opposed the introduction of genetically modified corn into Mexico because of concerns about hidden health problems and the possibility that altered seeds could mix with and eventually destroy native varieties (see SourceMex, 2000-10-25).

In a report released at a corn symposium in Oaxaca in early March, a group of 17 researchers from the Montreal-based CEC said altered corn poses enough of a concern to native crops to merit the creation of special monitoring systems and an early alert mechanism. The 17 CEC researchers were among 50 scientists from the US, Canada, and Mexico who participated in the symposium. "We don't know to what extent these genetically modified plants could just take over and cause other species of corn to die off," said Chantal Line Carpentier, the report's coordinator. "But that possibility is out there."

The CEC report raised concerns that GM corn was being dispersed in Mexico through Distribuidora Conasupo (DICONSA), a government-private partnership that sells commodities like corn, beans, flour, and powdered milk to the poorest segments of the population, primarily in rural areas.

Amanda Galvez, a representative of the government's Comision Intersecretarial de Bioseguridad y Organismos Geneticamente Modificados (CIBIOGEM), confirmed to participants at the symposium that the government has detected the presence of GM grain in the sierras of Oaxaca and Puebla. She said government scientists found that 7.6% of plants tested positive for genetic modification in 2001. That number declined to 0.11% in subsequent studies, but data from corn tested this year was not yet available. Galvez promised the government would continue efforts to prevent further spread of altered corn. "We need to monitor planting patterns over the long term," said Galvez.

Study responds to concerns by organizations in Oaxaca

The commission conducted the study at the request of a handful of environmental organizations and indigenous groups in 2002, following the release of an independent report confirming traces of GM seeds in the Sierra Juarez in northern Oaxaca and southern Puebla (see SourceMex, 2002-05-08). The results presented in Oaxaca are still in draft form and require approval by the full CEC, which is expected to review the 400-page report in June.

Some organizations that requested the study were not totally pleased with the report saying the symposium rehashed information already presented in 2002. "There is nothing new," said Aldo
Gonzalez, a leader with the Union de Organizaciones de la Sierra Juarez. Gonzalez also criticized findings by the CEC and CIBIOGEM that gene transfer in the area studied has thus far been "insignificant from a biological point of view."

The study also notes, however, that the uncontrolled spread of GM corn could one day make it impossible to find corn not manipulated by science. "I would like to ask if the amount of genetically modified plants really has dropped or if the lower amounts detected simply mean the scientific community can't detect transgenic effects in second generation corn," said Gonzalez, in response to Galvez's statements. Some indigenous groups that attended the symposium criticized the CEC for "a lack of respect" for local communities because the report was presented in English.

Still, the CEC decision to call for stricter monitoring of GM crops is considered a positive step. Hector Bourges, a researcher at Instituto Nacional de Nutricion Salvador Zubiran, said consumption of GM corn could cause the human body to become immune to antibiotics and promote the development of new toxins or allergies. "There is an urgent need to carefully study the impact of genetically modified corn on health," said Bourges, who collaborated in the CEC study.

The Mexican government in recent years has publicly endorsed efforts to control the spread of GM corn in Mexico. In 1999, the administration of former President Ernesto Zedillo approved legislation prohibiting the production of genetically modified varieties in Mexico outside licensed laboratories (see SourceMex, 1999-10-13). Earlier this year, President Vicente Fox's administration imposed a moratorium on the importation of certain corn varieties known to be genetically modified.

The prohibition announced at a meeting of the Cartagena Protocol in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, in February covers corn imports destined for human consumption as well as those ultimately going toward industrial production. The protocol, which went into effect in 2000, seeks to make international trade in GM organisms more transparent through security measures that meet the needs of consumers, industry, and, most of all, the environment.

Mexico ratified the protocol in 2003. Administration officials said their decision to prohibit the import of GM grain fits within the goals of the Cartagena Protocol. "This measure is necessary because corn is a major source of nutrition for Mexico," said Victor Manuel Villalobos Arambula, executive secretary of the Comision Intersecretarial de Bioseguridad y Alimentos Modificados (CIBIOGEM). "Any genetic changes to corn that will eventually enter the food chain could have an impact on human health,"

Villalobos Arambula said in Kuala Lumpur. Fox government's positions come into question The administration's statement in Kuala Lumpur met skepticism in the environmental community, which questioned the Fox government's commitments under the Cartagena Protocol.

Environmental groups say the Fox government may have difficulty reconciling these statements with its decision last October to sign a secret accord with the US and Canada to allow those countries to ship corn with a content of genetically modified organisms as high as 5%. This compares with standards adopted by the European Union (EU), which limit the presence of genetically modified organisms to 0.3% to 0.7%.
Under the accord, US exporters would not be obligated to disclose the percentage of genetically modified organisms in the corn but simply to place a label stating that a shipment "may contain" genetically modified seed.

A relatively high percentage of the corn produced in the US contains a naturally occurring toxin known as Bacillus Thuringiensis (BT), which is intended to repel pests. The toxin, found in samples obtained in Oaxaca, probably entered Mexico through corn imported from the US, which is used primarily for cattle feed. Mexico imported 5.6 million metric tons of corn in 2003, the majority of which originated in the US. US government estimates indicate that about 8.2 million hectares are planted with GM corn in the US. Greenpeace-

Mexico was especially critical of the accord, which was not published or released to avoid opposition from agricultural and environmental organizations. "CIBIOGEM has turned down recommendations related to public opinion and the study of socioeconomic impacts to privilege everything related with the commercialization of transgenics," said Alejandro Calvillo, director of Greenpeace Mexico. "This [accord] only benefits biotech companies." Gustavo Alanis, president of the Centro Mexicano de Derecho Ambiental (CEMDA), said the agreement not only runs counter to the government's commitment under the Cartagena Protocol but is also illegal. "[The Constitution] requires these type of agreements to be approved by the Senate," said Alanis.

Mexican officials acknowledged having entered into an informal arrangement with the US and Canada on GM organisms but denied that any formal agreement was signed with the two NAFTA partners. Villalobos Arambula said the purpose of the agreement was to allow Mexico to gain access to more accurate information on the use of GM seed in the two countries. "This agreement allows us to better coordinate our policies because neither of the two countries has signed on to the Cartagena Protocol," he said.

**Mexico increases production of organic produce**

In stark contrast to the intrusion of genetically modified agricultural products, Mexico is rapidly becoming a major center for production of organic fruits, vegetables, coffee, meat, and other agricultural products.

The Iowa State University Extension Service says that an "organic" label generally implies to the consumer that:

*The product was grown by a producer with a dedication to agricultural practices that strive for a balance with nature, using methods and materials that are of low impact to the environment.

*The product was created as a result of a commitment to maintain and replenish soil fertility with the belief that the highest quality foods are grown on healthy land.

*The contents have been minimally processed to maintain the integrity of the food without artificial ingredients, preservatives, or irradiation.

"The primary goal of organic agriculture is to optimize the health and productivity of interdependent communities of soil life, plants, animals, and people," says the US Department of
Agriculture's National Organic Standards Board (NOSB). In Mexico, more than 300,000 ha have been dedicated to production of organic foods in Chiapas, Oaxaca, Veracruz, Baja California, and Sinaloa states. And producers say that, if demand keeps growing, the area could increase to about 500,000 ha. The vast majority of the organic produce, about 90%, is grown for export to the US and the European Union (EU), earning Mexico about US$100 million a year in revenues.

"In our country, the production tendencies are not dictated by domestic consumers but by foreigners," said Pablo Munozledo, director of organic-produce company Aires de Campo. Munozledo said this tendency is an indication that the biggest market for organic products is wealthier consumers. Ironically, the price of organic products is cheaper in Mexico than produce sold at supermarkets, in part because of a marketing scheme that eliminates intermediaries. Still, Aires de Campo and other companies like Sunval, Nocon, Green Corner, and Le Truffe have managed to carve out a small market for organic products in Mexico. The majority of this produce is sold in Mexico City. (Sources: Agence France-Presse, 02/26/04; El Financiero, Associated Press, 03/11/04; El Independiente, 03/12/04; The Herald-Mexico City, 02/12/04, 02/18/04, 03/12/04; La Cronica de Hoy, 02/26/04, 03/12/04; Notimex, 06/23/02, 03/05/04, 03/11/04, 03/14/04; La Jornada, 02/14/04, 03/11/04, 03/12/04, 03/14/04; El Universal, 02/14/04, 03/09/04, 03/11/04, 03/12/04, 03/15/04)