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## **NAFTA Environment Panel Urges Mexico to Suspend Imports of GMO Corn**

*by LADB Staff*

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The environmental commission created through the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) has issued a controversial recommendation to the Mexican government to suspend all imports of genetically modified (GM) corn. The recommendation from the Montreal-based Commission on Environmental Cooperation (CEC) presented to the US, Canadian, and Mexican governments in late September forms part of the agency's final report entitled "Maize and Biodiversity: The Effects of Transgenic Maize in Mexico."

In addition to suspending imports, the report also urges the Mexican government to instruct farmers on how to avoid using genetically modified seeds and to create a system of labeling to allow the public to identify food products that used GM corn. The CEC's final report follows up on its recommendation earlier this year that Mexico begin closer monitoring of imports of produce engineered through manipulation of genes (see SourceMex, 2004-03-17).

The CEC initiated the research in 2002 at the request of a group of environmental organizations and indigenous groups, which were concerned about the government's procrastination in investigating reports that some corn crops in southern Mexico had been contaminated by corn imports (see SourceMex, 2002-05-08). "It has been proven that [GM corn] can transfer certain traits to the land in cultivation," said a summary of the final report. "So in each case the possible negative effects to the environment must be determined."

The full report was not released to the public. The CEC suggests that any research conducted on corn take into account the needs and the know-how of small-scale farmers in Mexico. At the same time, the report does not preclude the possibility that the government may eventually allow controlled imports of GM corn. In the report, the CEC recommends that governments "consider both the potential benefits and risks of cultivating genetically modified corn for small-scale farmers and large commercial companies."

The CEC report also recognizes that its recommendations that Mexico suspend imports of GM corn could come into conflict with the country's obligations to open its markets under NAFTA and the World Trade Organization (WTO). Under NAFTA, Mexico is scheduled to remove all barriers on corn imports by 2008, even though the country has already been importing large amounts of US corn to compensate for domestic shortages (see SourceMex, 2000-01-19 and 2001-06-27).

### ***US, Canada downplay report***

The US and Canadian governments immediately downplayed the CEC report and asked the commission to conduct another review of its findings. The two countries, which supply the bulk of Mexico's grain imports, said the report contains observations that are "contradictory" and "lacking

in scientific evidence to sustain the conclusions." In letters to CEC executive director William Kennedy, both the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and the Canadian Environment Ministry questioned the report's lack of scientific evidence to back its recommendations.

The lack of scientific backing, said the EPA, "severely undermined" the credibility of the report and reduced the viability of the final document. The CEC report comes on the heels of charges by several environmental organizations that the Fox administration has allowed imports of genetically modified corn and other products for years despite the known risks to local agriculture crops and to the health of consumers.

The Fox administration has already authorized foreign companies to sell more than 20 varieties of corn, potatoes, canola, soybeans, tomatoes, and cotton without any tests to prove they are safe for use. This led organizations like Greenpeace Mexico to organize a major protest earlier this month (see SourceMex, 2004-09-08).

The Congress and agriculture organizations have also joined the debate, with legislators from the former governing Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI) planning to introduce a bill to allow a floor debate on genetically modified agricultural products. The bill's sponsor, PRI Deputy Jesus Morales Flores, who is also a member of the Confederacion Nacional Campesina (CNC), said the debate on GM products would occur in the context of legislation to protect Mexico's biodiversity (Ley de Bioseguridad).

The center-left Partido de la Revolucion Democratica (PRD) wants to take the issue one step further by filing an administrative complaint against Agriculture Secretary Javier Usabiaga for allowing the importation of GM seeds and produce. A coalition of environmental and agriculture organizations have urged the Congress to ask the CEC to release the full report to the public before completing work on the Ley de Bioseguridad.

The coalition includes Greenpeace Mexico, the Asociacion Nacional de Empresas Comercializadoras de Productos del Campo (ANEC), the Centro Mexicano de Derecho Ambiental (CEMDA), the Union de Grupos Ambientalistas de Mexico (UGAM), and three other organizations. The coalition noted that Canada supports the release of the full report even with its objections to the lack of scientific evidence to support the conclusions, which leaves the US as the only country blocking its publication. (Sources: Notimex, 09/19/04, 09/20/04; The Herald-Mexico City, 09/20/04; Agencia de noticias Proceso, 09/21/04; La Jornada, 09/20/04, 09/22/04)

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