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Fox' Administration Denies Requests for Test Plots for GMO Corn

by LADB Staff

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In a somewhat unexpected decision, President Vicente Fox's administration has denied permits for three multinational agribusiness companies to plant test plots of genetically modified (GM) corn in three northern Mexican states. The three companies Monsanto, Pioneer Hi-Bred International, and Dow AgroSciences had pushed hard in recent years for the Fox government to allow them to plant the test plots in Sonora, Sinaloa, and Tamaulipas states.

The administration had denied two previous requests without holding a public hearing. But the Secretaria de Agricultura, Ganaderia, Desarrollo Rural, Pesca y Alimentacion (SAGARPA) agreed to hold a hearing earlier this year, even though a special committee had not completed a survey of native corn species and had not established rules to protect those species, as required by law (Ley de Bioseguridad).

SAGARPA's decision to schedule the hearing raised some concerns that the ministry was about to award the permits, the Mexico City daily newspaper La Jornada said in late August. "We know that these companies, with the support of President Vicente Fox, were pushing the agriculture and environment secretariats to approve these experimental plots, regardless of their impact on the environment," said Gustavo Ampugnani, coordinator of Greenpeace Mexico's campaign for sustainable agriculture and against genetically modified seeds.

On Oct. 18, the administration announced that it had denied permits for the three companies to plant the altered seeds. SAGARPA officials said there was no other option at this point but to deny the permits because the surveys of native species and new rules governing genetically modified seeds have not yet been completed.

Seed companies say test plots not a danger to biodiversity

The seed companies had fully expected to have the test plots approved this year. "We were surprised by this decision," said Eduardo Perez Pico, director of technological development at Monsanto Comercial SA de CV, the company's subsidiary in Mexico. The Monsanto official argued that there was no reason to deny the permit because the fields, in northern Mexico, are far from the sites where heirloom species are grown in Mexico. "These are not centers of origin or of biodiversity of corn," Perez Rico said.

The position of Monsanto and the other companies hits at the heart of the debate, which is whether Mexico as a whole should be declared a "center of origin" for corn, which would force the government to take steps to prevent planting of non-native varieties, especially altered seed, anywhere in the country. Evidence indicates that corn originated in southern Mexico. "The researchers and experts are still discussing it, and there are some controversies," said Pedro Mata,

an official with SAGARPA's health and safety agency (Servicio Nacional de Sanidad, Inocuidad y Calidada Agroalimentaria, SENASICA).

The debate over genetically modified corn has raged in Mexico since at least the 1990s, with environmental advocates like Greenpeace and Grupo de los Cien pushing for the government to ban the use of altered seeds (see SourceMex, 1999-10-13). The effort to ban GM corn intensified in 2001, when researchers discovered native-corn strains in Oaxaca and Puebla had crossbred with transgenic DNA (see SourceMex, 2001-12-05)

In 2002, indigenous groups and environmental advocates brought the matter before the Commission on Environmental Cooperation (CEC), an agency created under the auspices of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). The groups accused the Fox administration of dragging its feet in the investigation of whether corn in the two-state area had been contaminated (see SourceMex, 2002-05-08). In 2004, the CEC recommended that Mexico take steps to more closely monitor corn imports to prevent the introduction of genetically altered corn (see SourceMex, 2004-03-17)

Later studies showed little evidence that the GM corn had taken hold in Oaxaca and Puebla (see SourceMex, 2005-08-17). Future approval of test plots still possible SAGARPA and the Secretaria del Medio Ambiente y Recursos Naturales (SEMARNAT) left the door open for future approval of the permits. "I expect the survey and the new rules on genetically modified organisms (GMOs) to be published in the government journal [Diario Oficial] in one or two weeks," said SENASICA director Javier Trujillo.

SENASICA officials said SAGARPA and SEMARNAT may in the end determine that corn is not a native or original crop in some areas of Mexico. "[In this case], there is the possibility of a permit being granted for the first phases of experimental projects," said Mata. Environmental advocates said they would not be surprised if the three multinational companies filed a legal challenge to allow the use of genetically modified seed. "Monsanto and the other corporations are threatening to file a legal appeal to this decision," said Ampugnani.

Greenpeace Mexico and other environmental organizations said they plan to appeal to the government of President-elect Felipe Calderon to resist the strong lobbying efforts from the multinational companies to approve the test plots. "We urge the president-elect not to cede to these interests," said Ampugnani. "Our food security, our genetic independence, and the patrimony of millions of Mexicans would be at risk."

Calderon is expected to also face strong lobbying from agricultural groups in northern Mexico, who argue that the improved seed offered by the multinational companies could help them become more competitive against US counterparts, who receive government subsidies and produce higher yields. Northern farmers contend that GM seeds could help them boost yields by about 10%. Greenpeace counters, however, that the rewards are not worth the risks. "It is really stupid to risk contaminating a genetic-origin center that has an incredible ecological richness just to please 500 people, big farmers," said Ampugnani.

Supporters of genetically modified corn argue that organizations like Greenpeace Mexico are holding back the progress of Mexican agriculture. Among those is syndicated columnist Sergio Sarmiento, who noted that GM corn is already in use in many countries without adverse effects. Such corn, he said, brings many benefits to the host country not only through increased production but also through environmental protection. "Let's imagine that we can improve the corn yields in our country by 15% and boost the earnings of farmers by 50%," said Sarmiento. "On top of that, consider the possibility that we could accomplish this without increasing contamination of the earth." (Sources: Notimex, 10/17/06; El Universal, 10/17/06, 10/18/06; Associated Press, Reuters, 10/18/06; La Jornada, 08/29/06, 10/16-19/06; Reforma, 10/13/06, 10/18/06, 10/22/06)

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