

3-25-2009

President Felipe Calderon's Administration Approves Limited Cultivation Of Genetically Modified Corn

LADB Staff

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/sourcemex>

Recommended Citation

LADB Staff. "President Felipe Calderon's Administration Approves Limited Cultivation Of Genetically Modified Corn." (2009). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/sourcemex/5291>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Latin America Digital Beat (LADB) at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in SourceMex by an authorized administrator of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact amywinter@unm.edu.

President Felipe Calderon's Administration Approves Limited Cultivation Of Genetically Modified Corn

by LADB Staff

Category/Department: Mexico

Published: 2009-03-25

The controversy regarding the introduction of genetically modified organisms (GMOs) flared up again in March after President Felipe Calderon announced a proposal to ease restrictions on the cultivation of altered corn. The plan, which modifies the Mexican law governing GMOs (Ley de Biodiversidad de Organismos Geneticamente Modificados), allows controlled cultivation of genetically modified (GM) corn but retains tight restrictions on who can plant the altered crops. The Calderon government said its decision was an effort to help Mexico increase its corn supply, particularly for livestock feed. But critics contend that multinational seed companies pressured the government to take this step, which could open the door for widespread use of GM corn in Mexico.

Under the changes to the biodiversity law, which the government published in the federal registry (Diario Oficial de la Federacion) in March, an unspecified number of permits will be issued to companies wishing to plant GM corn in Mexico. Calderon's decision comes almost three years after former President Vicente Fox opted against the experimental plots (SourceMex, October 25, 2006). The plots where the corn will be planted will have to be surrounded by 200-meter buffer zones and contained by physical barriers to prevent a cross with other crops. In addition, farmers will have to take other steps to prevent pollination, such as removing silks from the plants.

Critics contend that these measures will not prevent cross-pollination. "It is not possible for altered corn and native varieties to coexist without contamination," said Alli Alejandro Espinosa, a researcher at the Universidad Nacional Autonoma de Mexico (UNAM). Espinosa voiced his concerns during a meeting of the consulting committee that decided to move ahead with the proposal. "By approving this proposal, the government has become an ally of [seed] companies like Monsanto." But the government insists that the altered corn will be good for Mexico in the long run and that all precautions will be taken to prevent contamination of native varieties.

Agriculture Secretary Alberto Cardenas Jimenez said the use of GM corn could increase Mexico's production by about 30%. "If we do this right, without having to hurry, we will be taking decisive steps to meet this goal," the secretary said in a press conference. Environment Secretary Juan Rafael Elvira Quesada said the change in the biodiversity law gives the government more power to crack down on violators. Anyone who plants GM corn without permission will be severely sanctioned, said the environment secretary. A dozen companies have put in requests to plant GM corn in Sinaloa and Sonora states under the new norms, although 26 firms and academic institutions are on a list of possible participants. "SAGARPA [Secretaria de Agricultura, Ganaderia, Desarrollo Rural, Pesca y Alimentacion] already has requests from 12 companies, including Pioneer, Monsanto, and Dow," said Fabrice Salamanca, president of Agrobio Mexico, an organization that represents biotechnology companies. "The process could take as long as six months."

While the initial plantings are targeted for Sonora and Sinaloa, Agrobio Mexico said the states of Chihuahua, Jalisco, Coahuila, and Tamaulipas are future targets. Farm groups, environmental advocates voice opposition. Reactions to the government's decision were passionate on both sides. As has been the case since the debate began, the strongest opposition is coming from organizations representing small and medium-sized farmers and from environmental advocates. Both constituencies argue that once GM corn is introduced, even in a controlled manner, it will be difficult to stop. In the long run, they argue, GM corn will take over Mexico, resulting in the loss of native varieties. Many experts contend that Mexico's genetic diversity must be preserved almost as an insurance policy. There are about 200 known native varieties of corn in Mexico, and biologists say the time may come when native genes are needed to reinforce native varieties (SourceMex, May 08, 2002 and August 17, 2005).

Agricultural organizations such as the Asociacion Nacional de Empresas Comercializadoras de Productores del Campo (ANEC), the Central Independiente de Obreros Agricolas y Campesinos (CIOAC), and El Barzon have vowed to take all legal means necessary to reverse the government's decision. ANEC president Victor Suarez accused the government of actions contrary to the spirit of the biodiversity law, which is to protect Mexico's heritage. Similarly, the environmental organization Greenpeace Mexico charged that the Calderon government's decision sets a bad precedent and could open the door to widespread planting of GM corn.

In addition, said Greenpeace, heavy lobbying by multinational companies influenced the government's decision. "The government of President Felipe Calderon is turning over our corn production to the monopolies, placing a higher priority on the requests of entrepreneurs instead of supporting small-scale producers, whose needs have been ignored for a long time," said Aleira Lara, coordinator of Greenpeace for the campaign against GMOs. ANEC's Suarez agreed, saying multinational companies from the US, Canada, and Argentina expected to benefit most from the decision. Business organizations denied they had pressured the government to approve the experimental planting. "The agriculture interests did not bribe or pressure the government in any way," said Agrobio Mexico's Salamanca. "These accusations are a myth and they generate a false debate from farm groups who claim to speak for all agricultural producers." Greenpeace countered that the government might have violated the law by failing to hold hearings before deciding to modify the biosecurity law, thereby eliminating transparency from the process.

Furthermore, the organization said the two agencies that will be overseeing the experimental planting SAGARPA and the Secretaria del Medio Ambiente y Recursos Naturales (SEMARNAT) ignored more than 16,000 petitions from Mexicans opposing any further steps to legalize the planting of GM corn. "[The two agencies] didn't care about warnings from Mexican scientists about the risk of contaminating the native varieties in our country," said Lara. Altered corn already circulating in Mexico CIOAC secretary general Federico Ovalle Vaquera and others pointed to another threat to biodiversity corn imports from the US. Ovalle says at least one-third of the 10 million metric tons of corn that cross the border into Mexico is genetically modified. "Since US corn imports are not labeled, it is impossible to determine what percentage contains GMOs," said Reynaldo Ariel Alvarez, executive secretary of the Comision Intersecretarial de Bioseguridad de los Organismos Geneticamente Modificados (CIBIOGEM). CIBIOGEM agreed that GM food is already in the Mexican food chain. "Even though it is difficult to determine the percentage of products in the

market that contain GMOs, let's use the US as a reference," said Alvarez. "In the US market, 75% of products sold in the supermarket contain GMOs.

In Mexico, the proportion would be about 50%." Business groups strongly support decision The business community, particularly the livestock and poultry industries, strongly favors the decision to allow test plots for GM corn. "The Mexican government finally opened the door for experimental planting of GMOs, after more than a decade of watching the growth of biotechnology globally and four years after the publication of the Mexican biodiversity law," said the Mexico City business newspaper El Economista. Many supporters also see GM seeds as a way to improve yields for corn and other grains, which would help prevent a potential food shortage. "Mexico does not need to waste any more time and must move forward with production of bioengineered food products," added El Economista. Agrobio Mexico is also urging the government to implement the project as fast as it can. "Manufacture of genetically improved seeds is expanding because this is what the agriculture industry is demanding," said Salamanca. "There is no evidence that it causes any health or environmental problems."

There is debate, however, on whether GM products pose health concerns. El Economista noted that the World Health Organization (WHO) has already declared that GMOs are just as safe as conventional ones. And Agriculture Secretary Cardenas repeated this assertion. "Nowhere in the world is it demonstrated that a GM crop has caused damage or affected human health," said the secretary. But critics are not convinced, saying there are some instances where GM corn has affected the health of humans. For example, they noted that the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) was forced in 2000 to recall products manufactured with Starlink, a genetically engineered corn containing the Cry9c protein. This corn variety, used primarily for livestock feed, made it into the human food supply despite concerns that it might trigger allergic reactions.

-- End --