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Debate On Genetically Modified Organisms Resurfaces As Fao Holds Biotechnology Conference In Mexico

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The debate on the use of genetically modified organisms (GMOs) resurfaced in Mexico in late February and early March, as critics and supporters gathered in Guadalajara to promote or protest the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) conference examining and promoting the use of biotechnologies. Supporters, mostly government officials and a handful of scientists and agronomists, lauded GMOs and other forms of biotechnology as the answer to potential global food shortages. Critics, including environmental advocates, indigenous-rights activists, academics, and other scientists, said the benefits are exaggerated and warned about health problems associated with GMOs. Opponents also reiterated their concern that genetically altered corn could cause the disappearance of Mexico's native varieties.

Proponents say biotechnology is more than just GMOs The theme of the conference, which took place March 1-4, was that biotechnology, including GMOs, could increase food supplies around the world, thus guaranteeing food security and allowing countries to meet Goal 1 of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which is to eradicate extreme poverty and hunger by 2015. Experts from 60 countries attended the conference. "In the past few decades, the field of biotechnologies has advanced at a formidable speed and generated numerous innovations, particularly in the field of pharmaceuticals and some in the field of agriculture," Modibo Traore, the FAO's assistant director-general, told conference participants.

Traore emphasized that the FAO's major challenges are to double food production by 2050 and to address the uncertainties of climate change effects on agriculture. The FAO went to great pains to explain that its gathering in Guadalajara was not exclusively about GMOs but involved many types of biotechnologies. By focusing entirely on GMOs, the UN agency said, other agriculture biotechnologies that are not controversial are ignored. "Agricultural biotechnologies encompass a wide range of tools and methodologies that are being applied to some extent in crops, livestock, forestry, fisheries and aquaculture, and agroindustries to help alleviate hunger and poverty, assist in adaptation to climate change, and maintain the natural-resource base in developing countries," the FAO said in a press release. Mexico moving forward with genetically altered crops Still, GMOs were very much on the minds of supporters and detractors in Guadalajara. The FAO presented data from the International Service for the Acquisition of Agri-biotech Applications (ISAAA), which noted that the amount of land devoted to genetically modified crops worldwide reached 134 million hectares in 2009, compared with 2 million ha in 1996.

Genetically altered seeds are used primarily for soybeans, but the technology is also used in crops like canola, cotton, rice, and corn. In Mexico, the government has begun using genetically modified seeds to grow corn, cotton, and alfalfa, and expects to use this technology for soybeans in the near future. "According to President Felipe Calderon's strategy for the agriculture sector, we are working on four areas: efficient use of water, better management of diseases and pests,

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enhancement and maintenance of subsoil fertility, and genetic improvement of crop varieties," said deputy agriculture secretary Mariano Ruizfunes Macedo. And some academics like Jose Luis Herrera Estrella of the Instituto Politecnico Nacional (IPN), Irapuato campus, see strong potential for Mexico to expand usage of GMO crops because there are a number of agronomists who are well-trained in this area. Herrera says that scientists are experimenting with a genetically modified agave plant, which is resistant to disease. The Mexican government has approved 77 products grown from genetically altered seeds, including eight varieties of corn. In 2009, permits were awarded for farmers to grow GMO corn in the northern states of Sonora, Sinaloa, Tamaulipas, Coahuila, and Chihuahua (SourceMex, October 25, 2006 and March 05, 2009). But government officials say they are proceeding very carefully with the introduction of GMO corn to ensure that native varieties are not contaminated.

Opponents organize parallel conference The government's recent efforts to introduce GMO corn have met with protests from environmental organizations and indigenous-rights advocates, who say that any introduction of genetically altered corn, whether through imports or cultivation, is eventually going to cross with the native varieties and cause irreversible damage. Even without the experimental plots of GMO corn, critics say a large amount of the corn imported from the US is genetically altered, creating the possibility of cross-contamination (SourceMex, August 17, 2005 and January 31, 2007). The international environmental organization Greenpeace organized a major protest at the Monumento a los Ninos Heroes, a popular gathering in Guadalajara, on a day when the FAO conference was being held. "Today, we fight for our corn," read a sign at the demonstration. "We demand that the government meet its obligation to give us healthy food and sustainable agriculture," said Aleira Lara, who coordinates Greenpeace Mexico's campaign for sustainable agriculture.

Lara said the government's decision to allow experimental plots planted with GMO corn endangers 59 native strains and another 200 adapted varieties. "Mexico is the cradle of corn and now finds itself threatened by the possibility of contamination caused by experimental plantings [of GMO corn]," he said. Opposition to GMOs and the right of Mexicans to protect their heritage was also heard very loudly at a conference parallel to the one held by the FAO. The alternate event was held March 1-7. Beyond potential damage to cultural heritage, critics also cite the possibility of health problems for the Mexican population, which consumes corn in larger amounts than people in almost all other countries.

Speaking at the alternate forum, Antonio Turrent Fernandez, a specialist at the Instituto Nacional de Investigaciones Forestales, Agricolas y Pecuarias (INIFAP), said laboratory studies suggest that consuming large amounts of genetically altered crops have the potential to cause damage to the liver and kidneys. "The small amount of corn consumed normally by an Austrian or a French consumer is not a reason for concern," said Turrent, who is also president of the Union de Científicos Comprometidos con la Sociedad (UCCS). "But for those of us who eat corn for breakfast, lunch, and dinner, the risk is much different." Turrent said the lower-income populations in Mexico are especially at risk because their diets rely more heavily on corn than those of middle and higher incomes.

Other experts at the alternate conference took issue with the conclusions presented at the FAO gathering, especially the suggestion that genetically altered crops like soybeans can be used to

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reduce global hunger. Miguel Altieri, a professor of agroecology at the University of California, Berkeley, said 180 million ha of genetically altered soybeans, corn, and cotton are grown globally, "but not one of these hectares" is devoted to growing crops that will be used as food. "Genetically modified soybeans are used primarily for animal feed and biofuels," said Altieri. "The same is the case for genetically altered corn, 70% of which is used for cattle and the rest to produce ethanol. And cotton and canola are not used to feed anybody." Altieri was part of a panel that included Inge Ambrecht of the Universidad del Valle, in Cali, Colombia; Ymelda Montoro, of the Red de Accion en Agricultura Alternativa (RAAA) in Peru; and Mark Wells of the South African Freeze Alliance on Genetic Engineering (SAFeAGE). The panelists criticized the FAO for caving in to multinational seed companies, which are behind the push for GMO crops. "Our position is that there are alternatives based on agroecological systems and that is what we must promote for the future of humanity," said Altieri.

There are those in Mexico who are concerned that multinational companies are attempting to gain control of corn varieties in Mexico. "Rather than introduce technology that could be helpful to us, these large companies want to appropriate our corn," said Adela San Vicente, a spokesperson for Semilla de Vida. "It would be a good business, and our country is handing it to them on a silver platter." One of the biggest criticisms of the FAO was its decision to hold this conference in Mexico, given the controversy regarding corn. "The FAO was mocking us by bringing the conference on biotechnology to this country," said the Grupo de Accion sobre Erosion, Tecnologia y Concentracion (ETC), one of the coalitions that came together to oppose the FAO conference. "They are ignoring the fact that the Mexican government is committing a historic crime by allowing the planting of altered corn in its place of origin."

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