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Price Increases, Renewed Debate over Genetically Modified Corn Place Food at Top of Concerns in Mexico in 2011

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Though overshadowed by ongoing security troubles and political campaigning, food has re-emerged as a growing issue in Mexico in 2011.

Beginning last year, a new round of price hikes for corn tortillas began gnawing away at consumers' pocketbooks, with prices for the staple food reaching 14 pesos (US\$1.21) per kg in some states by March and threatening to go even higher as production uncertainties and rising energy costs cast a pall over the agricultural economy.

If the specter of a new tortilla crisis was evident by the dawn of the new year, it only loomed larger after unusual freezes wiped out hundreds of thousands of acres of corn in the key producer state of Sinaloa and other areas in February. Nearly 70% of the Sinaloa crop perished in the subfreezing weather, according to the Secretaría de Agricultura, Ganadería, Desarrollo Rural, Pesca y Alimentación (SAGARPA).

Swinging into action, President Felipe Calderón's administration helped growers replant nearly 350,000 hectares of corn and other crops in Sinaloa alone, and federal authorities pledged to expedite payments of approximately US\$240 million in agricultural subsidies and credits to ease the Pacific state's farmers through hard times.

But it's still unclear if the replanting will prevent production deficits and forestall the need to import more corn from abroad, especially from the US.

Government grants Monsanto permission for GM test plot

In March, the Calderón administration added a volatile ingredient to the bubbling stew of the corn and food crisis. In a move that whipped up new polemics regarding food sovereignty and biocultural diversity, SAGARPA granted the transnational biotech company Monsanto permission to grow its Mon 603 genetically modified (GM) corn seed on a small pilot plot in the northern border state of Tamaulipas. Reputedly, the corn variety is resistant to glyphosate, a commonly used herbicide.

The federal agency said the decision was made in coordination with the Secretaría del Medio Ambiente y Recursos Naturales (SEMARNAT), which imposed 32 conditions Monsanto would be required to follow or face sanctions, including possible closure of the plot.

"The issuance of this permit was possible in the sense that it complied with the principles of biosafety case by case and step by step," SAGARPA insisted in a communiqué.

SAGARPA's decision was immediately criticized by Greenpeace Mexico, the national (No Corn, No Country) campaign, and the Unión de Científicos Comprometidos con la Sociedad (UCCS), affiliated with the US-based Union of Concerned Scientists (UCS).

Greenpeace and its allies contended that the Monsanto permit violated the national biosafety law, since it was approved without the prior public disclosure of the results of experimental crop trials.

They warned that control of agriculture will shift to Monsanto and other transnational corporations that own seed patents and charged that transgenic seeds not only do not deliver the enhanced yields they promise but could also jeopardize human health given a lack of independent health studies.

The GM opponents maintained that transgenic seeds could jeopardize native Mexican corn by cross contamination. Mexican biologist and UCCS member Alma Piñeyro cautioned that Monsanto's pilot farm plot is very close to where a species of native Tamaulipas corn is cultivated.

The Tamaulipas pilot project "opens the door to the massive planting of transgenic corn that will put at risk corn agriculture and the nourishment of Mexicans," the critics said, "while forcing us to eat daily transgenic products that have been prohibited in other countries."

The move to allow test plots with GM corn is a policy enacted by the Calderón government ([SourceMex, June 25, 2008](#)) and ([Aug. 25, 2010](#)). Calderón's predecessor, former President Vicente Fox, considered requests to plant test plots with GM corn but ultimately denied the proposals ([SourceMex, Sept. 21, 2005](#)).

Some farmers back GM use in Mexico

For some farmer groups, particularly in the north of the country, planting transgenic corn varieties purported to be more resilient and boasting better yields is a matter of utmost urgency. Mortimer Cabrera, representative for the Unión Agrícola Regional del Norte de Tamaulipas (UARNT), contended the Calderón administration was moving too slowly in approving GM corn crops. He compared Monsanto's pilot permit to "testing out a car race in your garage."

Mexican biosafety law lays out three distinct stages for transgenic crops: an experimental phase, a pilot stage, and finally a commercial one, which is theoretically approved only after a battery of environmental concerns is fully satisfied.

SAGARPA says experimental permits have been approved for 69.74 ha in Sinaloa, Sonora, Tamaulipas, Coahuila, and Durango since 2009. Monsanto's Tamaulipas pilot permit was the first of its kind; currently, no commercial GM corn permits have been granted.

The Tamaulipas controversy is but the latest one surrounding the introduction and presence of GM corn in Mexico.

In 2007, Greenpeace Mexico and small-farm-advocacy groups uncovered evidence that GM corn was present in more than 10,000 ha of cropland in the northern state of Chihuahua, even though there was no government permission to grow the crops.

Suspicion regarding the seeds' origin turned to north of the border. Chihuahua relies heavily on hybrid seeds imported from the US, where more than 60% of the corn is now transgenic.

In 2009, Greenpeace Mexico, the Centro de Derechos Humanos de las Mujeres (CEDEHM) of Chihuahua, the Frente Democrático Campesino (FDC), and El Barzón farmers' organization filed a citizen submission with the Montreal-based North American Commission on Environmental Cooperation (CEC), the side commission connected to the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) established to help resolve environmental disputes between governments and their citizens in the member nations of the trade pact.

The complaint accused the Mexican government of failing to enforce its own environmental laws regarding transgenic corn plantings in Chihuahua. Late last year, however, the CEC dismissed the submission, determining that the Mexican government had taken measures to safeguard corn crops and was investigating the Chihuahua problem.

This is not the first complaint brought before the CEC regarding genetically modified organisms (GMOs). In 2002, indigenous groups and environmental organizations asked the NAFTA commission to investigate imports of transgenic corn ([SourceMex, May 8, 2002](#)), prompting the CEC to recommend that Mexico suspend imports of modified corn ([SourceMex, Nov. 22, 2004](#)).

Corn has special place in Mexican culture

Far from an arcane technical dispute, the issue of transgenic versus traditional corn strikes at the heart of Mexico's cultural identity and figures into larger and growing debates on nationalism, the loss of food self-sufficiency, and ecological well-being.

Considered the cradle of corn culture, Mexico boasts numerous native maize varieties that are used to make tortillas, tamales, the popular atole drink, and other emblematic dishes. Corn is central to Mexican cosmology, symbolizing an indigenous and rural legacy that is threatened by export-oriented agriculture, urbanization, migration, and violence.

Concern for corn's future led legislatures in the states of Tlaxcala and Michoacán to pass laws earlier this year that give local communities and state authorities a voice in the introduction of transgenic corn.

Although the Tlaxcala law explicitly defines corn as a state patrimony, the measure does not go far enough in banning GM corn outright, according to the state's Consejo Nacional Urbano y Campesino (CNUC), a popular-sector group that has staged protests against the law.

At the national level, the Calderón administration argues that climate change coupled with rising food imports make exploring the viability of new and highly productive corn varieties a pressing necessity. Climate scientists regard Mexico as among the most vulnerable nations in the world to extreme-weather events and water shortages that threaten agriculture.

"In Mexico, climate changes may limit [water] supply while water for increasing [export] agricultural production places further demands on already overdrawn resources," noted a program announcement for an upcoming May meeting between US and Mexican climate-change researchers in Guanajuato and co-sponsored by the Universidad de Guanajuato and Texas A&M University. The two academic institutions say that 104 of Mexico's 653 aquifers are already overdrawn.

Escalating international commodity prices and rising import costs are also driving the push for GM corn and other transgenic crops in Mexico.

In perhaps the most thorough study of Mexican corn policy since the advent of NAFTA, researchers coordinated by the US-based Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, the University of California at Santa Cruz, and Mexico's Centro de Investigación y Docencia Económicas (CIDE) recently examined trends in farm production, government subsidies, imports, and other facets of the agricultural economy.

The 2010 report, , said foreign imports of eight basic agricultural products shot up from 1990-1992 to 2006-2008.

Contributing researcher Timothy A. Wise of Tufts University reported that, prior to NAFTA, less than 10% of the corn consumed in Mexico was imported. By 2006-2008, the figure was more than 30%. SAGARPA says Mexico currently imports 7.23 million tons of corn annually.

Corn imports have been mostly the yellow variety used for animal feed, though increasing reports indicate that imported corn is now used in human food as well. Traditionally, Mexicans prefer white corn for their tortillas.

A study by the Instituto de Investigaciones Económicas of the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM) revealed that prices charged by the small neighborhood tortilla shops that proliferate across the country increased from 2.5 pesos (US\$0.21) per kg a decade ago to more than 10 pesos (US\$0.87) per kg by 2011.

The tortilla price increases coincided with a decade when the minimum wage suffered a 30% decline in value, the study stressed.

The Centro de Modelística y Pronósticos Económicos, another research institute at UNAM, recently projected that water and energy prices would go up 20%-25% during 2011, thus putting additional pressures on the cost of food production. Prices for food and other basic goods were high on the list of grievances of tens of thousands of union members who took to the streets in traditional May Day marches held across Mexico on May 1. [Note: Peso-dollar conversions in this article are based on the Interbank rate in effect on May 10, 2011, reported at 11.54 pesos per US\$1.00].

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