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Billionaires Carlos Slim and Bill Gates have joined efforts to promote long-term global food security by providing millions of dollars to fund research for improved varieties of corn, wheat, and other crops. The two tycoons—who are at the top of the Forbes list of the wealthiest people in the world—were on hand for the opening of a new agricultural research center in Texcoco, México state.

Slim donated US$25 million for the effort through the Fundación Carlos Slim, while Gates pledged about US$90 million available over a five-year period through the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. The funds will be used to expand infrastructure and attract top researchers to the Texcoco facility managed by the Centro Internacional de Mejoramiento de Maíz y Trigo (CIMMYT).

The expanded complex is expected to double the CIMMYT’s capacity to develop better seeds and expand its capability to assist farmers in the developing world.

"We decided to construct new facilities and expand and modernize existing ones, which would allow us not only to increase research but also provide scientists with state-of-the art equipment," said Slim. "This way they won’t have to complete their advanced genetic research in an overseas laboratory."

Gates agreed that the new facility in Texcoco would conduct the world’s most important agricultural research work during the next several decades. "These laboratories will help attract the best talent in the world to come and work here," said Gates.

Increased, improved food production a major goal

CIMMYT director Thomas Lumpkin said the support from Gates and Slim would in the end benefit 500 million small-scale farmers around the world, who provide sustenance for 2 billion people, or one-third of the global population. "The world needs to grow more food with fewer resources, and less water, land, labor, and fertilizers," said Lumpkin.

The CIMMYT director heaped praise on Slim and Gates. "We have two visionaries and philanthropists and the constant support from their foundations, which, along with the participation of the Secretaria de Agricultura, Ganadería, Desarrollo Rural, Pesca y Alimentación (SAGARPA), send a very strong signal to the world that something important is happening here," said Lumpkin.

Scientists from 100 countries will work at the new facility, which will operate 90 separate laboratories: 76 dedicated to bioscientific projects and the other 14 toward biosecurity. The scientists will be working with 28,000 varieties of corn and 130,000 types of wheat. The site will also house 26 greenhouses and a germoplasm bank.

In addition, Slim said CIMMYT would cooperate directly with 150 research and academic institutions to seek improvements that would benefit agriculture in Mexico and around the world.
"We are confident that we can expedite the process of improving seeds and agriculture in general in our country," said Slim.

The advances in seed technology are expected to help Mexico’s effort to regain self-sufficiency in agriculture and reduce reliance on imports, particularly corn. "An increase in production is what interests me the most," said Slim. "We are worried about the increase in demand for agricultural products."

**Effort also directed at boosting Mexico food output**

Agriculture Secretary Enrique Martínez said Mexico produces about 58% of the food consumed in the country, and the goal is to increase that ratio to 75% in the next six years. At present, Mexico imports about one-third of the corn consumed in the country, with most of those imports going toward animal feed. Mexico produces about 20 million tons of corn annually on a planted area of about 7.2 million hectares.

The project in a way builds on CIMMYT’s MasAgro sustainable agriculture program, which the Mexican government expanded with a US$49 million grant in 2011, plus an additional pledge of US $138 million in the next decade. SAGARPA said the MasAgro project—which has won praise from the Group of 20 (G-20) association of industrialized nations—has increased farmer profits by about one-third and yields by one-half.

The CIMMYT, created in 1943 through a grant from the US-based Rockefeller Foundation and the Mexican government, also works on developing agricultural products that are resistant to climate change and pests and contain higher nutrition levels.

The center provides training in efficient agricultural techniques and sustainability and conservation. But the research and consultation work is not confined to Mexico, as there are CIMMYT facilities in Afghanistan, Bangladesh, China, Colombia, Ethiopia, India, Iran, Kazakhstan, Kenya, Nepal, Turkey, and Zimbabwe.

Slim said the center would conduct important research to help farmers around the world cope with the impact of climate change. "Conditions to produce food are deteriorating rapidly, and in many parts of the world water is becoming scarcer and the global climate is warming up," said Slim. "We have climate change, but we also have significant volatility in raw materials, and that makes improved efficiency and farm productivity indispensable."

**Critics worry about research on GMOs**

While Slim and Gates were receiving plaudits for their commitment to address global food insecurity, there were some questions about the types of agricultural research that would take place at the Texcoco site. In particular, there is strong concern that the facility would be working with genetically modified organisms (GMOs). This concern has been a problem in Mexico since at least the 1990s.

Lumpkin told reporters that CIMMYT would conduct research using GMO seeds if there was a request from a particular government but would not become involved in mass production of altered corn. The CIMMYT in recent years has sounded the alarm about genetically altered varieties [SourceMex, Aug. 25, 2010].
Gates offered a stronger endorsement of GMO seeds. In an interview with Carmen Aristegui on CNN's Spanish-language program, he acknowledged that research with GMO seeds would be a strong option at the Texcoco center because yields for some genetically modified varieties are three times higher than those for native corn in Mexico. "The most important thing to keep in mind is that the weather is getting worse and that the poor need more productivity," said Gates.

Gates said each farmer should decide whether he or she wants to plant GMO corn, but he also acknowledged concerns about genetically altered corn. "Science can make a big difference, but you have to be careful," he said.

The biggest concern about the presence of GMO corn in Mexico is the potential for unintentional or intentional contamination of the heirloom varieties, which are considered part of Mexico's patrimony (SourceMex, Oct. 13, 1999, Oct. 25, 2000, Aug. 17, 2005, and March 10, 2010).

There have also been concerns that genetically modified agricultural products can produce some health problems (SourceMex, March 17, 2004).

"If Bill Gates and Carlos Slim are going to plant large amounts of genetically modified corn in our country, the Mexican people in just a few years will be fed exclusively with the type of corn that is resistant to changes in climate and viruses and is produced abundantly and in a uniform manner," columnist Jane de la Selva wrote in SDPNoticias. "In other words, our tortillas will be genetically modified."

Notwithstanding her tongue-in-cheek comment, de la Selva challenged scientists at the new center to investigate the harmful effects of GMO crops. "The CIMMYT foundation has not complied with its humanitarian obligation to investigate the short- and long-term harmful effects to people who consume genetically modified corn or wheat," said de la Selva. "If they had conducted such research and obtained a favorable result, they would have published it."

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