Study Supports Ban on Planting of Genetically Modified Corn in Mexico

Carlos Navarro

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

Recommended Citation

https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/sourcemex/6314

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.
Study Supports Ban on Planting of Genetically Modified Corn in Mexico

by Carlos Navarro
Category/Department: Mexico
Published: 2017-01-11

A Mexican researcher has published a study indicating that genetically modified corn does not provide significant benefits over native varieties. The study, conducted by Elena Lazos Chavero, a scientist with the social research entity Instituto de Investigaciones Sociales at Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM) found that GMO corn does not result in higher yields or resistance to drought or disease than native varieties.

According to the study, Mexico has between 59 and 64 native varieties of corn, which are competing with the GMO imports. “We do not need the transgenic corn,” said Lazos Chavero, pointing out that Mexico has sufficient genetic diversity to cover domestic needs.

She noted that multinational seed companies are attempting to promote GMO corn varieties as more resistant to disease, pests, and drought, but said native varieties have historically been able to cope with those same problems.

According to Lazos Chavero, the sale of GMO corn could contaminate the native varieties, endangering Mexico’s agricultural patrimony.

Lazos Chavero, who also serves on the board of Greenpeace México, has conducted several dozen studies on a variety of topics involving agriculture, food sovereignty, the loss of biodiversity, and the challenges rural communities face in their effort to reach self-sufficiency.

“The possible dangers to our agricultural production have been proven,” according to a supporting report published in the daily newspaper El Heraldo de Chihuahua in December. “By introducing genetically altered traits to native varieties, these undergo a genetic and physiological decomposition. The consequences can be devastating for Mexican agriculture, as corn is a plant that can be easily pollinated, and thus contaminated.”

Mexico has prohibited commercial planting of genetically altered varieties on a commercial basis. Seed companies, however, are allowed to plant altered corn in experimental plots.

Seeking cheaper feed
Multinational seed companies have pushed to plant GMO corn in Mexico for at least 10 years, with mixed success. In 2006, then-President Vicente Fox (2000-2006) denied requests for Monsanto, Pioneer Hi-Bred International, and Dow AgroSciences to plant test plots with GMO corn in northern Mexico (SourceMex, Oct. 25, 2006). However, Fox’s successor, Felipe Calderón (2006-2012), approved limited cultivation of genetically modified corn three years later (SourceMex, March 25, 2009). In 2015, a court overturned a two-year ban on commercial planting of GMO corn (SourceMex, Aug. 26, 2015), but this decision was reversed by another federal court (SourceMex, March 23, 2016).

Mexico produces a sufficient amount of white corn, which is used almost entirely to produce foodstuffs for human consumption. However, the country has a deficit of yellow corn, the variety
used primarily to produce feed for livestock and poultry. While the planting of GMO corn remains restricted in Mexico, much of the corn that is imported from the US is genetically altered.

Livestock and poultry producers in northern states have joined the seed companies, without success, in the effort to gain approval to plant genetically altered yellow corn. They argue that Mexico should be able to produce its own corn for the livestock industry rather than rely on imports.

For environmental advocates and the government, the big concern is that yellow corn planting could easily contaminate white corn through cross-pollination. Some varieties of corn are not able to cross-pollinate with yellow corn, including blue corn and popcorn.

The threat of imported corn to native varieties is not fully known, although there is concern that contamination could occur (SourceMex, May 8, 2002, and Sept. 22, 2004). Any replanting of imported seeds, however, would be equivalent to the test plots that some companies are allowed to keep. The difference is that strict controls are required for test plots, which would not be the case for random plantings of GMO corn.

“The majority of the yellow corn that we import comes from the US, and we are certain that it is 100% genetically modified,” said Vicente Gómez Cobo, president of the Asociación Nacional de Ganaderos Lecheros, the dairy producers’ organization, which supports commercial planting of GMO corn in Mexico. “This is an issue that we must confront if we are to advance, since [genetic altering] is the technology used most commonly around the world.”

**Record corn imports**

Imports of US corn have been increasing steadily in recent years, with imports reaching 11.9 million tons in 2015, according to the US Department of Commerce. With that total, Mexico surpassed Japan as the leading destination for US corn exports. Japan, which had been the leading buyer of US corn since the mid-1980s, imported 11.1 million tons of corn in 2015.

Imports continued to increase during 2016. According to statistics from the private agriculture consultants Grupo Consultor de Mercados Agrícolas (GCMA), Mexico imported 8.65 million tons of corn in the first seven months of 2016, an increase of more than 20% from the same period in 2015. “We are on track to set a new record for the year,” the GCMA said in a report in October.

The report estimated the value of corn imports for January-July at more than US$1.5 billion. The cost is expected to increase with the continuing weakness of the Mexican peso versus the US dollar. Concerns about President-elect Donald Trump’s economic policies toward Mexico have weakened the Mexican currency significantly (SourceMex, Dec. 7, 2016, and Jan. 4, 2017). As of Jan. 11, the exchange rate was 21.9 pesos per US$1.00, a decline of 20% since Trump’s election in November.

-- End --