

Growing Maize Disaster

Mexico remains on high alert following the attempts of Monsanto and other agribusiness multinationals to win the government's approval to plant 2.5 million hectares of transgenic maize in Mexico, the center of origin and diversity of maize.¹ [As ETC wrote last month](#), approval would allow the boldest coup of a global food crop in history and would threaten biodiversity, farmers' rights and resilience in the face of climate change. While the outgoing government of Felipe Calderón did not approve the applications before leaving office on November 30th, its last-minute, surreptitious changes to regulatory procedures removed obstacles that could have hindered the new administration's ability to grant the companies' requests.

Inside and outside Mexico, voices have decried the attack aimed at the heart of Mexican cultures, food, health and nature. Since mid-November, there have been workshops and public meetings, as well as petitions and protests by farmers, artists, activists and scientists in social and print media and on the radio. [La Via Campesina, Grain and ETC Group wrote an open letter to the UN's Food and Agricultural Organization \(FAO\) and Convention on Biological Diversity \(CBD\)](#) asking the multilateral agencies to intervene for the sake of global food security.²

As Greenpeace reported at the end of November,³ the Mexican government quietly changed its regulatory procedures so that the Secretary of the Environment and Natural Resources (Semarnat) is no longer legally bound to take into account the advice of its own and other government agencies' experts on biosafety. Three government bodies had made critical, extremely cautionary or explicitly negative recommendations when previously consulted about the release of GM maize in Mexico.

Up until the Calderón administration's parting shot, approvals to release GM crops were granted by the Secretary of Agriculture (Sagarpa) in agreement with the Secretary of Environment and Natural Resources, with a binding (*vinculante*) obligation to follow the recommendations of the National Institute of Ecology (INE), the National Commission for the Knowledge and Use of Biodiversity (Conabio) and, when applicable, the National Commission of Natural Protected Areas (Conanp). The Calderón government did away with the obligation to follow the

¹ The official list of commercial applications for environmental release of GMOs is available here: <http://www.senasica.gob.mx/?id=4443>. The applications for commercial GM maize release are in numbers 61, 62, 79, 80, 81, 82 from year 2012.

² La Via Campesina, Grain, ETC Group, "Maíz transgénico en centro de origen. Carta abierta al CBD y a la FAO," 29 November 2012. Available at <http://viacampesina.org/es/>

³ Greenpeace Mexico, "Semarnat modifica reglamento para allanar camino a transgénicos," press release, 29 November 2012, available online: <http://www.greenpeace.org/mexico/es/Prensa1/2012/Noviembre/Semarnat-modifica-reglamento-para-allanar-camino-a-transgenicos/>.

recommendations of the three institutions, and the reference to the National Institute of Ecology (INE) was deleted altogether.⁴

The Mexican National Commission for the Knowledge and Use of Biodiversity (Conabio) had recommended the companies' applications be rejected on the basis of the risks to biodiversity and because it considered coexistence of peasant varieties with GM maize an impossibility. In 2009, Conabio published a study on the origin and diversification of maize,⁵ and subsequently began a project involving 235 experts from 70 institutions,⁶ which concluded that the whole Mexican territory is the center of origin of maize. This contradicts the conclusions conjured by the Mexican government in its map published in October 2012, which designated some areas in several states of Mexico *outside* the center of origin – the areas include those where the multinationals have asked to plant GM maize.

After the government of Enrique Peña Nieto took office on December 1st, the new Secretary of Environment, Juan José Guerra, was quick to declare that he didn't know enough about GMOs to give an opinion on the controversial issue, but stated it was a "technical decision" and he would consult scientists.⁷ While it is absurd to constrain the issue of maize in Mexico to the "technical" realm, there are ample reasons to deny the applications on technical grounds, many of which are as cited in the [November 26 letter from the Union of Concerned Scientists \(UCCS\) to the Mexican government](#), signed by more than 2700 scientists and other experts, including two Nobel laureates and dozens of national science award winners. The UCCS letter requests that the government immediately reinstate the moratorium against GM maize and cancel all experimental trials as well.⁸

On December 7th, a broad coalition of urban and rural organizations demonstrated against GM maize outside the Secretary of Agriculture (Sagarpa).⁹ Mazahua indigenous women and urban grassroots organizations made tortillas in the street, with Mexican farmers, indigenous peoples and civil society organizations affirming their resistance to transgenic maize and the attempted coup by transnational companies. Delegates from all the organizations met with biosafety

⁴ Diario Oficial de la Federación 26 November 2012, "Decreto por el que se expide el Reglamento Interior de la Secretaría de Medio Ambiente y Recursos Naturales." The change is in article 27 - XVII. A comparison with the previous version of art 27 is in the Greenpeace news release cited in footnote 3. See:

http://dof.gob.mx/nota_detalle.php?codigo=5279128&fecha=26/11/2012

⁵ Kato, T.A. et al., "Origen y diversificación del maíz: una revisión analítica," Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, Comisión Nacional para el Conocimiento y Uso de la Biodiversidad, México, 2009, available online:

<http://www.biodiversidad.gob.mx/genes/pdf/Origen%20del%20MaizUv.pdf>

⁶ National Commission for Biodiversity, Project Centers of Origin and diversification, available online:

http://www.biodiversidad.gob.mx/v_ingles/genes/centers_origin/centers_origin.html

⁷ Enciso, A. "Para decidir sobre maíz transgénico, reunión intersecretarial..." *La Jornada*, México, 6 December 2012, available online: <http://www.jornada.unam.mx/2012/12/06/politica/017n1pol>.

⁸ See also, UCCS, European Network of Scientists for Social and Environmental Responsibility (ENSSER), International Network of Engineers and Scientists for Global Responsibility (INES), Third World Network and Grain, "GM Maize in Mexico: An irreversible path away from agricultural biodiversity, farmer livelihoods and the right to food within the center of origin of maize," November 2012, available online: <http://www.ensser.org/developing-responsible-approaches-to-risk-assessment/gm-maize-in-mexico/>.

⁹ The demonstration was called by the Asamblea Nacional de Afectados Ambientales, Red en Defensa del Maíz, Movimiento Urbano Popular, Jóvenes ante la Emergencia Nacional, Movimiento Yo soy 132 and Unión Popular Revolucionaria Emiliano Zapata (UPREZ).

authorities of the Secretary to discuss the situation they consider “a national emergency.”¹⁰ They called for an open debate on GM maize to take place as soon as possible, with the understanding that the government not allow planting of GM maize in the meantime. On the same day as the demonstration in Mexico City, civil society organizations in Germany demonstrated their solidarity in front of Mexico’s embassy in Berlin.¹¹

The United Nations and the world’s governments are standing by while the creators of maize are threatened by a government administration that has the power to unilaterally and irrevocably undermine global food security¹² and 7,000 years of peasant maize breeding. If Mexico’s government allows the commercial planting of GM maize, the precedent will have been set for centers of origin and diversity of food crops to be plundered and for the temporal territorial priorities of one administration to prevail over the human Right to Food.

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¹⁰ See the original statement by the 8th Assembly of Environmental Affected in November 2012: <http://rededefensadelmaiz.net/2012/11/pronunciamiento-emergencia-nacional-maiz-transgenico-a-punto-de-envenenar-nuestras-mesas-2/>.

¹¹ See <http://www.emergenciamais.org/> with photos and the declaration in English.

¹² The poor in Latin America, but also in Asia and Africa, depend on breeding from maize diversity to support their subsistence and to help them cope with impacts of climate change.