



News Release  
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[More on the Mexican GM Maize Scandal](#)

## Unnatural Rejection?

*The academic squabble over Nature magazine's peer-reviewed article is anything but academic*

More than 144 farmer and other Civil Society Organizations from 40 countries have signed a Joint Statement being released today on the Mexican GM Maize Scandal. The Statement comes on the eve of an international science policy meeting in Los Banos, Philippines where a global response to the scandal will be discussed. The 144 organizations are demanding that the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR) work together with the Convention on Biological Diversity to halt the contamination of the Mesoamerican Centre of Genetic Diversity for maize – one of the world's most important food crops. News that genetically modified (GM) maize was turning up in farmers' varieties first appeared in *Nature Biotechnology* magazine last September and was confirmed in November by a peer-reviewed article in *Nature*. According to the 170 signatories to today's Joint Statement, the academic and industry attacks on the findings of the Mexican Government and U.S. university researchers has been orchestrated to keep the scandal from embarrassing the biotech industry as it tries to lift the European, Brazilian, and Mexican moratoria (*de facto* or otherwise) on genetically modified seeds or foods. If the Philippine meeting of the Genetic Resources Policy Committee of the CGIAR does not act decisively and immediately to protect farmers in Mesoamerica, civil society will take the issue directly to the April meeting of the Biodiversity Convention in the Hague, and the World Food Summit in Rome in June. The text of the Joint Statement follows.

### Joint Statement on the Mexican GM Maize Scandal

A huge controversy has erupted over evidence that the Mesoamerican Center of Genetic Diversity is contaminated with genetically modified (GM) maize material. Two respected scientists are under global attack and the peer-review process of a major scientific publication is being threatened. There is infighting at the Mexican ministries of environment and agriculture, and intergovernmental organizations and international scientific institutes are squabbling over methodologies rather than carrying out their mandates.

**Background:** It all began with an article in *Nature* last September reporting on the findings of Mexico's Ministry of the Environment that extensive GM maize contamination had been found in farmers' varieties in two states. In November, a peer-reviewed article, also in *Nature*, by Dr. Ignacio Chapela and graduate student David Quist at the Berkeley campus of the University of California, offered scientific evidence of the Mexican contamination. A subsequent story in *Nature Biotechnology* reported that the Berkeley scientists had unconfirmed preliminary indications that GM pollution may have seeped into the world's most important maize gene bank. At a workshop on January 23<sup>rd</sup> hosted by civil society organizations in Mexico, the country's environment ministry presented a study

that revealed that GM contamination of farmers' varieties of maize had been found at contamination rates of up to 35% in remote villages in Oaxaca and Puebla. The findings were jointly prepared by the Ministry of the Environment and Natural Resources, the National Institute of Ecology, and the National Commission on Biodiversity.

Pro-industry and pro-GM academics went ballistic. News that a Center of Genetic Diversity had been polluted with GM traits could crush industry hopes that the European Union would end its de facto GM moratorium in March. Industry is also concerned that the April meeting of the Convention on Biological Diversity would quash global labeling pressures and Mexico's specific calls for compensatory mechanisms for biotech accidents.

**Civil Society and CIMMYT Exchange:** On February 6th, many of the leading Farmers' and other Civil Society Organizations attending the World Social Forum in Porto Alegre Brazil joined together to write to Jacques Diouf, the Director-General of the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and Ian Johnson, the World Bank Vice-President who chairs the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR) to ask them to call for a moratorium on the shipment of GM seed or grain into their Centers of Genetic Diversity. The letters were in part prompted by telephone and e-mail discussions with Dr. Tim Reeves, the Director-General of the International Maize and Wheat Improvement Center (CIMMYT) - one of the 16 CGIAR "Green Revolution" centers. Although Reeves cautioned that the methodology supporting the contamination studies was under attack - and that three rounds of investigation at CIMMYT had revealed no contamination of their maize gene bank, he did agree that there was GM contamination in Mexico and that it would be only a matter of time before contamination reached the gene banks. Reeves also volunteered that his comments could be quoted. Since then, the CIMMYT director has expressed his regret that CSOs did not wait for clarification on the issues of methodology before writing to FAO and CGIAR, but he has stood by the two main points: there is contamination in a Center of Genetic Diversity, and it is only a matter of time before that contamination reaches into the gene bank - if it hasn't already occurred.

**Industry's strategy:** CIMMYT could hardly be described as anti-GM. It has the premiere biotech programme within the CGIAR. Why then are some scientists and institutions attacking the findings of the Government of Mexico and the Berkeley scientists? It would seem to be a project doomed to failure since regardless of the methodologies involved - no serious scientist can really dispute the contamination? Three reasons make short-term gain for long-term problems a reasonable strategy for supporters of industry:

1. **Damage control in Europe and Brazil:** The world's biggest non-GM consumer of agricultural imports is still tottering uncertainly on the issue of genetic modification. The more anti-GM activists can be attacked or discredited the better industry's chances will be to win an end to the *de facto* moratorium when EU Heads of State gather in Barcelona March 15-16. Meanwhile, Brazil - the world's largest non-GM exporter - has been making loud pro-GM noises. Concerns about environmental damage in Mesoamerica readily translate into Brazilian alarm about damage to the Amazon. As with Europe, the Mexican scandal is bad news for biotech in Brazil.

2. **Biosafety Protocol containment:** When the world's environmental ministries gather in The Hague (April 8-26), Terminator technology and the Biosafety Protocol are high on the agenda. The Protocol emphasizes the special role of Centers of Origin and Centers of Genetic Diversity. Unless they can keep doubts circulating as to whether or not Mesoamerica is contaminated, there could be an irresistible pressure for a moratorium and for industry to foot the bill for clean up.

3. **Academic intimidation:** The Biotech industry has been hurt by the scientific reports of respected academics such as Dr. Arpad Pusztai and now Ignacio Chapela and David Quist (authors of the Berkeley study). Pusztai (formerly employed at the Rowett Institute in Edinburgh, UK) published a study revealing that GM potatoes fed to lab rats interfered with their growth, organ development, and immune systems.) They got Pusztai temporarily muzzled and fired, and they want to do the same to Chapela and Quist - as a warning to any other academics who break ranks

over GM research. Pro-industry academics are engaging in a highly unethical mud-slinging campaign against the Berkeley researchers.

Given the stakes, the biotech industry's desperate attempts to cloud and confuse the scandal is not surprising. If EU Heads of State drop their moratorium in March and the Biodiversity Convention skates clear in April without demands for contamination compensation, then whatever bad news comes down in May is manageable.

***CIMMYT's role:*** What is harder to understand is the silence of CIMMYT and the entire CGIAR. Hiding behind a debate they themselves understand to be irrelevant on methodologies of GM detection, the Center that sees itself mandated to conserve maize genetic diversity has failed to state firmly and publicly what they believe to be the truth - that there is contamination in the field and there will be (or is already) contamination in gene banks. Without taking sides or even entering into the methodologies debate, CIMMYT must do what its mandate demands - state the reality as they believe it to be and announce the steps they are taking - and think others should take - to conserve diversity and safeguard farmers. Anything less is corporate complicity and totally unacceptable.

**We call upon CIMMYT to:**

- ❑ Publicly acknowledge that GM maize contamination has taken place in Mesoamerica;
- ❑ Confirm that under present circumstances the operational assumption has to be that GM maize contamination in gene banks is inevitable;

**We call upon FAO to:**

- ❑ Ensure that the Code of Conduct on Biotechnology which is currently under development, incorporate mechanisms to control the diffusion of GM materials to vulnerable regions and to guarantee that the burden of ecosystem restoration and farmer and national compensation rests with those who pollute.

**We call upon CGIAR and FAO together to:**

- ❑ Review the current FAO-CGIAR Trust Agreement to ensure that the integrity of germplasm held in Trust is protected and that there are no intellectual property claims pertaining to any of the germplasm;
- ❑ Recommend steps to safeguard local farmers' varieties and gene banks.
- ❑ Propose an immediate moratorium on the shipment of GM seed or grain in countries or regions that form part of the Centre of Origin or Centre of Genetic Diversity for the species.

**We call upon Academia and the Private Industry to:**

- ❑ Renounce immediately the use of intimidator tactics to silence potentially 'dissident' scientists. We call upon the scientific community to publicly support the academic freedom of scientists whose studies conflict with the interests of industry and to censor those academics and institutions that slander the competence or integrity of those who publish peer-reviewed studies.

We request that the Sixth Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity meeting in The Hague, Netherlands April 8-26 place the issue of the GM contamination of Centres of Origin or of Genetic Diversity on its agenda for urgent debate and that the World Food Summit Five Years Later, taking place in Rome from June 6-13 also place this issue on its agenda.

**Signatories to this statement include:**

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