

Reservations of Maize: Centers of Origin and Diversity

Ana de Ita

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The Law on Biosafety and Genetically Modified Organisms Act, popularly known as Monsanto's Law, was an expression of the lack of political will in Congress to prohibit the planting of transgenic corn in Mexico, despite being the center of the crop's origin and diversity. A crucial piece of the law was missing, however--the official determination of centers of origin and diversity. Following the presidential decree of 2009, this should have prevented the granting of permits for experimental and pilot plantings of transgenic maize--permits which were granted nonetheless in nine northern states, in addition to Nayarit.

On November 17, 2011, the Secretaries of Agriculture, Livestock, Fisheries and Food (SAGARPA) and Environment and Natural Resources (SEMARNAT) reached an agreement on the centers of origin and diversity of maize, which should prohibit the planting of transgenic maize in those places because it cannot coexist with native corn without contaminating it. More than one third of the country is not included in the designation, so GM maize may be sown (if other factors do not prevent it, such as desert, steep mountains, forests, protected areas, or cities).

The problem with classifying centers of origin and diversity is that implies that other regions are not. Maize is a cross-pollinating crop, making it ineffective to delimit borders that the wind and insects do not respect. Nor is it possible to put a stop to the exchange of seeds and knowledge between people, the same processes that gave birth to the great diversity of breeds and varieties that have been culturally modified through the centuries. Delineating regions impedes the very exchange of seeds and knowledges that created maize.

Transgenic contamination of native maize was found in many regions more than 10 years ago, despite the fact that there was a moratorium prohibiting the planting of GM corn anywhere in the country. Maize contaminated with transgenes was found in regions that are now officially classified as a center of origin and diversity; opening regions to the cultivation of genetically modified crops will cause this pollution to spread exponentially.

Irrigation was one of the fundamental criteria used to define the regions suitable for planting transgenic corn, following the convenient logic that if an area requires irrigation, it could not have been a center of origin. Because GM seeds were designed for irrigated industrial agriculture, almost all the irrigated areas of the 10 northern states of the country were selected to allow its cultivation--areas currently planted with conventional corn and other grains. The north of Mexico produces about one quarter of corn consumed across the country, and despite the use of commercial hybrid seeds in this region, 29 of the 61 distinct maize landraces that exist in Mexico are located in the north, as mentioned in the document by Turrent.

But the possibility of planting transgenic corn is not limited to the northern states. It may also be planted in areas in Campeche, Chiapas, Guanajuato, Guerrero, Jalisco, Michoacan, Nayarit, Oaxaca, Quintana Roo, San Luis Potosi, Tabasco, Veracruz, Yucatán and Zacatecas. These spots include irrigation areas with high production potential like the Fraylesca and Soconusco, in Chiapas; Mascota, in Jalisco; Apatzingán, en Michoacán; Coyuca, Petatlan, and Atoyac in Guerrero, which may be of interest to agribusiness. Furthermore, several areas already protected for biodiversity, such as El Ocote and Montes Azules in Chiapas, were excluded from the list of centers of origin.

One of the criteria used to determine the centers of origin and diversity was the indigenous presence, however, they ignored territories inhabited by Maya, Kiliwa, Paipal, Cucapá, kumial, maya, Kickapoo, Tzeltal, Mam, Chol, Lacandon, Tarahumara , Guarijios, Tepehuano, Pima, Chichimec, Nahua, Huichol, Huave, Chontal, Zoque, Zapotec Huasteco, Papago, Yaqui, Totonac, Popoluca, Chinanteco—the descendants of those who domesticated maize in Mexico.

Despite being Mayan territory, a wide area of the Yucatan Peninsula was not classified as a center of origin and diversity. This area coincides with the region currently invaded by genetically modified soybeans, which may be planted in rotation with GM maize. Corn has walked with the people of Mexico throughout its history, and it is the product of knowledge shared and exchanged across borders. Hence the peasants and indigenous people, along with scientists and social sectors, reclaim all of Mexico as the center of origin and diversity of maize.

Translated by Alice Brooke.