

22 October 2003

CIMMYT Director General Responds to Erroneous ETC Statements

On 9 and 10 October 2003, the ETC group issued two press releases reporting that studies in which they participated had identified transgenes in maize varieties grown in farmers' fields in nine Mexican states. CIMMYT welcomes the new information on this issue. However, we regret that ETC ventured beyond reporting the implications of their findings and restated their erroneous accusations about CIMMYT's activities with respect to transgenic maize in Mexico, especially the maintenance of CIMMYT's maize genebank.

ETC's press release, "Maize Rage in Mexico," charges that "there is no plan to protect vital national and international collections of crop germplasm stored in Mexico and elsewhere." To the extent that this accusation is made towards CIMMYT, which is the custodian of a large international collection of maize genetic resources in Mexico, it is completely and obviously false.

ETC should know this. CIMMYT has publicly explained how it is dealing with this situation each time the group has issued a press release making this accusation. CIMMYT has communicated directly with staff of ETC about this issue as well.

This statement recapitulates CIMMYT's position. We cannot, however, speak for the Mexican government or for any of the other governments with which we work (we work with about 100 countries). Nor are we empowered to take the kinds of steps that a government might take and that some groups apparently demand of us.

CIMMYT's actions with respect to transgenic maize in Mexico date back to long before gene flow between genetically modified crops and landraces were subjects of debate—*years before the ETC group first raised the issue with respect to Mexico*. The chronology of actions that CIMMYT has taken is repeated below.

1. In 1995, when others were silent on this issue, CIMMYT, the Mexican National Institute of Forestry, Agriculture, and Livestock Research, and the Mexican National Agricultural Biosafety Committee began to express their concern at a jointly convened workshop on "Gene Flow Among Maize Landraces, Improved Maize Varieties, and Teosinte: Implications for Transgenic Maize." Proceedings of this workshop were published in early 1997 and are available on the CIMMYT web site.
2. On 4 October 2001, CIMMYT issued a statement on the news brief in *Nature* (Vol. 413) which had just reported that transgenic maize was growing in the Mexican states of Oaxaca and Puebla. We stated: "The International Maize and Wheat Improvement Center (CIMMYT)...regards this as a serious development and offers its considerable expertise to the appropriate Mexican institutions to (1) help identify the type and source of the introduced gene(s), (2) assess potential impacts to biodiversity, the ecology, and the socioeconomic environment, and (3) to explore possible responses." We stand by that statement.

3. On 16 October 2001, CIMMYT posted results of its initial tests on maize landraces stored in its genebank. Those tests found no traces of transgenes. We took further action: we decided not to distribute maize accessions from CIMMYT's genebank unless they were collected before transgenic maize was commercially released anywhere in the world. CIMMYT took these precautions rapidly, *prior* to the publication of the scientific study on this topic by Quist and Chapela (*Nature* Vol. 414, 29 November 2001).
4. Since then, CIMMYT has continued tests to ensure the absence of transgenes in maize genetic resources stored in its genebank. In September 2002, we implemented new procedures at CIMMYT's research stations in Mexico to reduce the possibility that transgenes could enter maize breeding materials or accessions being regenerated for the genebank (see "[The CIMMYT Maize Program and Transgenic Maize](#)"). These precautions are essential, because each year more than 20,000 packages of seed (ranging from a few grams to half a kilogram) arrive at CIMMYT from our partners throughout the world. CIMMYT also ships more than 45,000 packages of seed from its genebank and breeding programs to other countries.
5. Thanks to rapid action and funding from the Rockefeller Foundation, in late 2002 CIMMYT initiated research focusing expressly on "the determinants and consequences of gene flow in maize landraces and implications for the livelihoods of Mexican farmers." It builds on earlier research by CIMMYT and the Institut de Recherche pour le Developpement, France. Landraces and farming systems in three broad maize-growing environments (highlands, lowlands, and the middle elevations) are being studied in 20 municipalities in the states of Mexico, Tlaxcala, Puebla, Hidalgo, and Veracruz. maize races. It is precisely this kind of research that is needed to move the debate (in Mexico and the world) beyond the facile, qualitative, and subjective assumptions that are currently made (e.g., that gene flow is either inherently "contaminating" or "improving"). It will provide the basis for scientifically informed assessments and decisions. We would hope that governments and civil society organizations alike would recognize that such scientific contributions are useful and in keeping with CIMMYT's capacity and expertise. Our hope is that these contributions will lead to constructive policies that address the very special issues raised by the presence of transgenic maize in a center of diversity.
6. The next step is to complement the protective measures in use at CIMMYT with routine, large-scale testing of seed that comes in and out of CIMMYT. On 6 and 7 October 2003, CIMMYT charged a group of its scientists and external experts from universities, government agencies, and advanced research institutes in Mexico, Canada, Switzerland, and the USA to recommend a cost-effective, large-scale, efficient protocol to identify transgenes at internationally accepted standards. Outcomes of this workshop ("[Technical Issues Related to Sampling and Detection of Adventitious Transgenic DNA Sequences](#)") are reported on our website. The protocol will be reviewed by management and will be validated for two crop seasons and revised if necessary. Such a protocol for screening breeding and genebank materials at CIMMYT may well serve as a model for similar institutions around the world. It should be of concern to the international community that this costly testing has not yet been supported by *dedicated funding* from any of the countries (developed or developing) or civil society organizations whose constituencies appear to value it.
7. Far from being silent on the topic, CIMMYT scientists over the years have regularly advocated the need for careful research and scientifically informed action in relation to transgenic maize in Mexico, even when such work literally "goes against the grain" of powerful industrial and political interests. We have published articles in international scientific journals, given numerous conference presentations and seminars, and have conducted more than 50 interviews with local and international media. We will continue to engage the media and stakeholders in the scientific community in the future.

ETC and its associates charge in their October press releases that CIMMYT's failure "to take action on the contamination of traditional maize is deplorable," and they go on to call for "a specific strategy and procedure to ensure that genebank accessions are protected from contamination." In both instances, as the information above clearly shows, they are wrong.

The question then arises whether ETC's attacks are born of ignorance or an intentional disregard for the facts. We trust it is the former. We would welcome the technical and financial support of ETC should they choose to help us in this vital work. Along with constructive action, we welcome constructive dialogue: communication through press releases has its limitations.

In an average year, CIMMYT provides genetic resources, including products of its breeding research, to about 80 countries, a strong testament to the value that governments and farmers place on CIMMYT's work. CIMMYT's mission is to act as a catalyst and leader in a global maize and wheat innovation network that serves the poor in developing countries. By drawing on strong science and effective partnerships, we create, share, and use knowledge and technology to increase food security, improve the productivity and profitability of farming systems, and sustain natural resources—including genetic resources. We intend to remain faithful to this mission and invite all who share such goals to join with us in the work needed to bring them to fruition.

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