

Published on Tuesday, April 5, 2005 by CommonDreams.org

An Honest Mistake?

by Liza Grandia

Syngenta admitted this week that, for over four years, it "mistakenly" sold hundreds of tons of an experimental corn seed not yet approved for human consumption.

Contaminating the world's food supply is becoming a habit for big agribusiness.

Back in 2000, a genetically-modified (GM) corn called StarLink was discovered in Taco Bell tacos. Manufactured by Aventis, StarLink was modified to be more insect-resistant through the insertion of a bacterial toxin into the corn's DNA. When eaten, however, it can provoke intense allergic reactions, including anaphylactic shock. The EPA had banned StarLink corn from human consumption, but allowed it to be grown for animal feed and let Aventis regulate itself. Mysteriously, though, StarLink corn ended up at Taco Bell. In the ensuing scandal, more than 300 food products were recalled. But the story didn't end there.

In 2002, Friends of the Earth released a report documenting how StarLink and other banned GM-corn brands were sent as food "aid" to poor countries by USAID and the World Food Programme. Even worse, to Guatemala, the aid was donated as whole kernels-risking that poor farmers might use them as seed. This has already happened with corn that Mexico was forced to import from the U.S. under NAFTA. Former UC-Berkeley biologist Ignacio Chapela has documented extensive GM-contamination in the states of Oaxaca and Puebla.

While chemical pollution eventually dissipates in the environment (over thousands of years), genetic pollution accelerates exponentially over time. Once GM corn gets planted, no farmer's crops are safe because corn cross-pollinates by wind over long distances and is irreversibly inserted into plant DNA. Another study published last month by Friends of the Earth found eighty percent of 77 corn samples taken from food aid or sold in the open market in Guatemala were already contaminated by banned GM-corn.

What does this mean for the 6 million Maya people of Mesoamerica who originally domesticated corn 7,000 years ago? For them, corn is sacred. According to their creation story in the Popol Vuh, the Mayan gods in fact molded the first humans from corn.

Maya people eat corn tortillas three times a day. They explain that if they do not eat corn, they cannot feel full. In the long hours I spent cooking and visiting with Q'eqchi' women in their homes, I documented almost thirty Q'eqchi' names for corn prepared in different ways.

Maya groups like the Q'eqchi' also save and plant many varieties of corn for practical survival. Guatemala has grossly inequitable land distribution-with some 2 percent of the elite owning about 80 percent of the land. To subsist on tiny plots of land, indigenous farmers plant different corn strains that will defend naturally against pests, ripen at different times, and survive in marginal places like hills or rocky areas. That's why corn diversity can be the critical difference against hunger and malnutrition for indigenous farmers

All these lessons crystallized one day when I accompanied a Q'eqchi' farmer friend, Don Pablo Botzoc to his fields. He explained the meaning of the four colors of corn: "They are like our bodies-red for blood, yellow for skin, white for bones, and blue/black for our hair." We passed through a neighboring farm treated with herbicides. Between the green stalks of corn, the chemically-burnt soil was muddy and dead. "How foolish that farmer is," he commented, "otherwise, he could have planted so many good foods." Indeed, Maya farmers' custom of planting tubers, beans, and other crops between their corn stalks can make the difference against hunger and malnutrition for their children.

I explained to Don Pablo that powerful men from the United States were developing a new corn seed that farmers would be obliged to buy from a store year after year along with a matching herbicide made by the same company. When Don Pablo realized that would mean he could no longer save his own local seeds, he said to me, without hesitation, "That is evil. Ink'a us."

The agribusiness giants know that small, subsistence farmers like Don Pablo will not voluntarily buy their expensive GM seeds. By "accidentally" dumping GM-contaminated corn on the poor, they can make a quick profit and systematically contaminate the world's corn seed. Perhaps the biotech giants hope the global citizenry will shrug off contamination as inevitable and allow regulators to loosen restrictions. Or perhaps it is a back-door trick to eventually demand royalties on the seed, as Monsanto has already done to Percy Schmeiser and other organic canola growers in Canada.

But, if the center of the world's genetic corn diversity in Central America gets contaminated further, we all risk a major plague wiping out humanity's third largest food crop. Have we learned nothing from the Irish potato famine?

Liza Grandia (B.A. Yale University, summa cum laude and with honors in Women's Studies) is a doctoral candidate in Anthropology at the University of California, Berkeley. She is currently writing a book about lowland frontier settlement processes among Q'eqchi' Maya villages in Guatemala and Belize. She also serves as the President of the board of directors of ProPetén, a Guatemalan non-profit (NGO) dedicated to the conservation of the natural and cultural patrimony of Petén, Guatemala. She can be reached at grandia@berkeley.edu.

###