

Mexico Farmers Protest Genetically Modified Corn Imports

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MEXICO CITY (AP)--Some 300 Mexican environmentalists and farm activists opposed to biotech crops demonstrated Thursday outside a Mexico City hotel to protest a meeting there of agricultural researchers from around the world.

The demonstrators tossed tortillas and ears of corn painted with fluorescent colors and skulls at a line of riot police guarding the hotel, and demanded the government halt the importation of genetically modified corn, which they claim has contaminated local varieties of the crop.

Protesters briefly scuffled with police in an attempt to enter the meeting, attended by Mexican agriculture officials and about 1,000 scientists from the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research, or CGIAR.

Waving placards reading "Long Live Corn!" the demonstrators blocked traffic and tried to knock down metal barricades.

The three-day CGIAR event focuses on stimulating economic growth in rural areas while reducing hunger and poverty. The group works to provide improved seeds and better agricultural practices, as well as providing training for agronomists.

In March, the Commission for Environmental Cooperation, a North American Free Trade Agreement watchdog panel, found genetically engineered corn in Mexico despite the country's six-year-old biotechnology ban.

It said modified genes spread by imported U.S. biotech corn threaten to displace or contaminate native varieties in Mexico, the birthplace of corn. Scientists say wild ancestral genes of corn might one day be needed to help commercial crops overcome diseases or adverse conditions.

In 1998, Mexico declared a moratorium on planting genetically modified corn, but farmers are believed to have planted some imported kernels meant for consumption as food.