Los Angeles Times
April 23, 2004
Home Edition

Commentary:
A Flood of U.S. Corn Rips at Mexico: Under free trade, small farmers and the nation's ecology are suffering.

Written by Michael Pollan, a professor at UC Berkeley's Graduate School of Journalism, and author of three books, including "The Botany of Desire." He is a member of the Land Institute's Prairie Writers Circle.

Americans have been talking a lot about trade this campaign season, about globalism's winners and losers, and especially about the export of American jobs. Yet even when globalism is working the way it's supposed to -- when Americans are exporting things like crops rather than jobs -- there can be a steep social and environmental cost.

One of the ballyhooed successes of the **North American Free Trade Agreement** has been the opening of Mexico to American farmers, who are now selling millions of bushels of corn south of the border. But why would Mexico, whose people still subsist on maize (mostly in tortillas), whose farmers still grow more maize than any other crop, ever buy corn from an American farmer? Because he can produce it much more cheaply than any Mexican farmer can. Actually that's not quite right -- it's because he can sell it much more cheaply.

This is largely because of U.S. agricultural policies. While one part of the U.S. government speaks of the need to alleviate Third World poverty, another is writing subsidy checks to American farmers, which encourages them to undersell Third World farmers.

The river of cheap American corn began flooding into Mexico after NAFTA took effect in 1994. Since then, the price of corn in Mexico has fallen by half. A 2003 report by the Carnegie Endowment says this flood has washed away 1.3 million small farmers. Unable to compete, they have left their land to join the swelling pools of Mexico's urban unemployed. Others migrate to the U.S. to pick our crops -- former farmers become day laborers.

The cheap U.S. corn has also wreaked havoc on Mexico's land, according to the Carnegie report. The small farmers forced off their land often sell out to larger farmers who grow for export, farmers who must adopt far more industrial (and especially chemical- and water-intensive) practices to compete in the international marketplace. Fertilizer runoff into the Sea of Cortez starves its marine life of oxygen, and Mexico's scarce water resources are leaching north, one tomato at a time.

Mexico's industrial farmers now produce fruits and vegetables for American tables year-round. It's ridiculous for a country like Mexico whose people are often hungry to use its best land to grow produce for a country where food is so abundant that its people are obese -- but under free trade, it makes economic sense.

Meanwhile, the small farmers struggling to hold on in Mexico are forced to grow their corn on increasingly marginal lands, contributing to deforestation and soil erosion.

Compounding these environmental pressures is the advent of something new to Mexico: factory farming. The practice of feeding corn to livestock was actively discouraged by the Mexican government until quite recently -- an expression of the culture's quasi-religious reverence for maize. But those policies were reversed in 1994, and, just as it has done in the United States, cheap corn has driven the growth of animal feedlots, sewage concentration and water and air pollution.

Cheap American corn in Mexico threatens all corn -- Zea mays itself -- and by extension all of us who have come to depend on this plant. The small Mexican farmers who grow corn in southern Mexico are responsible for maintaining the genetic diversity of the species. While American farmers raise a small handful of genetically nearly identical hybrids, Mexico's small farmers still grow hundreds of different, open-pollinated varieties, commonly called landraces.

This genetic diversity, the product of 10,000 years of human-maize co-evolution, represents some of the most precious and irreplaceable information on Earth, as we were reminded in 1970 when a fungus decimated the American corn crop and genes for resistance were found in a landrace in southern Mexico. These landraces will survive only as long as the farmers who cultivate them do. The cheap corn that is throwing these farmers off their land threatens to dry up the pool of genetic diversity on which the future of the species depends.

Perhaps from a strictly economic point of view, free trade in a commodity like corn appears eminently rational. But look at the same phenomenon from a biological point of view and it begins to look woefully shortsighted, if not mad.