

# Nafta Scientists Call for Safeguards On Biocorn

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A Nafta-appointed group of scientists warned the U.S. to be more careful about exporting genetically modified corn to Mexico, where some ancient corn-farming regions have been contaminated by transgenic pollen.

The report recommends new safeguards on U.S. grain shipments to Mexico, such as labeling corn shipments that might contain genetically modified kernels and milling all that corn so that it can't be planted.

Such recommendations would make doing business with Mexico more expensive for U.S. companies. The report also potentially undermines Washington's argument before the World Trade Organization that the European Union doesn't have any legitimate reasons to limit imports of U.S. farmers' genetically modified crops.

The report, a Spanish version of which was leaked by Greenpeace in October, was officially issued yesterday by the Secretariat of the Commission for Environmental Cooperation, a watchdog agency created by the U.S., Canada and Mexico to monitor the environmental impact of the 1994 North American Free Trade Agreement. The administration of the commission makes recommendations to Nafta countries, which aren't obligated to adopt them.

The appearance of gene-altered corn in Mexico is a problem because it is the birthplace of that plant; the concern is that the modified version could crowd out the ancient types, shrinking the genetic diversity of the species. While the report found no evidence of significant environmental harm, it called for trading safeguards largely for sociocultural concerns: Many Mexican farmers feel that their traditions are threatened by biotechnology.

That justification was attacked by the Bush administration, which called the report "fundamentally flawed and unscientific." The National Corn Growers Association charged that Mexico would violate WTO rules by requiring the milling of U.S. corn.

In another move, the group of 16 scientists appointed by the commission's Secretariat called on the U.S., Canada and Mexico to consider prohibiting biotechnology companies from genetically modifying corn plants to make drugs and industrial compounds. Some scientists worry these types of corn could get into the food supply and harm people.

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