


Viewpoint: Mexican government undermining science and agriculture

 ver the last two years, the Mexican government led by Andrés Manuel López Obrador (who goes by his initials, AMLO) has carried out a battle against scientific innovation in the country's farm fields. AMLO declared during his campaign that his government would be against transgenic (genetically modified, or GM) crops. So far, that is one of the few campaign promises he has kept — at the expense of farmers, producers and consumers.

Since day one in office, AMLO's administration opted to appoint anti-GMO activists to strategic positions, such as Science Minister Elena Alvarez-Buylla, who is known to be an active opponent of GM crops. In her two years as the head of CONACYT (Consejo Nacional de Ciencia y Tecnología, the agency in charge of promoting scientific and technological activities), she has shifted funding from biotechnology research and scientific research centers to social sciences. She also continues to spread myths and misinformation about biotechnology through the Science Ministry's official channels.

Ban on GM crops

The political influence and reach of environmental NGOs are not new in Mexico. Even before the current administration took office these groups had pursued legal actions against GM crops in the country, starting with corn seven years ago. They achieved a ban of GM corn (maize) at the national level, stopping research and adversely affecting farmers and producers by blocking their access to agricultural tools needed to address climate change effects, such as heat and drought, and satisfy the growing domestic demand for maize. However, rather than eliminating GM maize, these legal actions actually resulted in an increase of GM maize imports from the United States — an increase that expands every year.

The current ban on GM maize also created a legal instrument that has been used against the GM soybean in the southern part of Mexico. This action was led by NGOs with a strong presence in the area, such as Greenpeace, as well as by local indigenous organizations that produce honey — much of it marketed as organic — for export to the European Union. While activists argued that GM maize had adverse effects on native maize varieties, their drive to ban GM soybean was motivated by economic interests, though it was sold as a need to protect pollinators and human rights. In one incident, customs officials detected pollen from GM soybeans in honey that was exported to the EU. Though the EU did not reject the shipment, activists used that episode to achieve a GM soybean ban at Mexico's national level.

Bt cotton — the only GM crop that is widely grown on a commercial scale in Mexico — is now dangerously close to being banned. Some decades ago, Bt cotton saved Mexico's textile industry, which was struggling in the face of insect pest attacks on the cotton crop. Thanks to the gradual introduction of pest-resistant GM cotton, the industry improved its profits and significantly reduced the use of pesticide applications in the cotton fields. But in recent months, the Ministry of Agriculture (SADER) has denied new environmental releases of GM cotton, limiting the varieties that farmers can use. However, cotton producers and farmers are unable to obtain conventional cotton seeds to replace the Bt varieties. Some cotton mill owners are now opting to sell their equipment because they fear the government will impose a

complete ban on GM cotton.

Banning glyphosate

Under the anti-GMO agenda in Mexico, GM crops are not the only target. In the last few months, the Ministry of Environment (SEMARNAT) started a battle against glyphosate-based herbicides. They argued that these products were highly toxic and caused adverse effects on human health, despite studies that endorse their safe use in the fields. Though the Ministry claimed its actions came from a scientific perspective, its public statements reflected common myths and misinformation about this herbicide.

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It's important to mention that glyphosate is widely used in Mexico, and not only by farmers with GM crops. Herbicide piracy is already a big problem in Mexico that could increase tremendously with an official ban on glyphosate. Discussions are currently underway at high levels of government to determinate the legal status of this herbicide, but the former head of SEMARNAT has declared that the country will ban glyphosate in coming years.

Ideology over facts

The official channels of the Ministry of Science, Agriculture, and Environment have been used to spread myths and misinformation about GM crops in an attempt to ban their use and move Mexico's food production to an agroecological system. Many consider this a dangerous move because more than 130 million Mexicans depend on domestic production as their primary food source. Farmers need access to better tools in order to produce more food and an agricultural policy that is based on science, not ideology. Though the AMLO government will last four more years, its restrictive actions against scientific innovation may endure for decades beyond that.

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