

Mexico Marks First World Action Day Against GMOs with Food Fair

by Talli Nauman | April 14, 2006

April 8 should go down in history. That was the date of the first food fair featuring cuisine with no genetically modified ingredients. It was a real sign of the times changing. If you think I should leave this topic to my food columnist colleague Vicky Cowal, just remember that what you eat is also on the front line of the environmental agenda. Why, genetically modified organisms (GMOs) have not yet been proven safe for the environment, let alone human health.

They're an experiment with scientific manipulation that got out of the laboratory before they could be tested, and now they are growing in places where they are not even legal to commercialize. That's why they are called Frankenfoods.

As seen in Oaxaca, the world's cradle of corn cultivation, rogue GMOs contaminate native species—in this case the staple grain corn. They could wipe it out, leading to reduced genetic variety, and the associated risks of world hunger. That is the opposite of what seed improvement programs are intended to do.

To make matters worse, seed companies and commodity companies are working worldwide to achieve legislation allowing them to distribute their products on a broader and broader scale. So environmentally conscious groups whose members have known this for a long time, have developed their own outlets for non-GMO commodities. The food fair served as a coming-out party for these outlets.

Held in conjunction with the First World Action Day Against GMOs being celebrated in 40 countries, the food fair offered a sampling of alternatives for producers and consumers at different locations around the country. It covered markets in the cities of Mexico, Guadalajara, Texcoco, Tlaxcala, Puebla, Oaxaca, Uruapan, and Xalapa.

The sponsoring environmental organizations revealed a label for growers and distributors to use, which tells shoppers that their products are free of GMOs. That private initiative was taken in response to the government's failure to require labels identifying raw materials and commodities with genetically modified content.

If indeed the fare featured was free of Frankenfoods, it also went one step better. Most of the provender for sale was organically grown, in other words free of pesticides, chemical fertilizers and antibiotics that upset your stomach, as well as the balance of nature. What's more, the organizers boasted, the diversity of vegetation promoted by non-GMO planting contrasts positively with the mono cropping engendered by transgenics. The advantages are greater biodiversity and natural resistance to disaster.

One of the promoters' objectives was to boost income for families in poor rural communities who practice agriculture based on traditional knowledge. Markets for their healthier produce are increasing, under doctors' orders, and health-conscious buyers pay more for food they know is free of contaminants. But making the connection between farmers and the market is often tough.

Unexpectedly a commodities giant has just announced it is following the trends of supply and demand for organic and other health foods. As much as critics berate Walmart for its policies, the March decision of this market leader to double its organic victuals and have 400 different kinds of them available by fall confirms that a sizeable portion of the public actually wants what's good for it. The decision also promises to stimulate potential suppliers in the GMO-free realm, many of whom are small, independent enterprises that need a hand up. Environmentalists hope it is a step toward a company commitment to using non-GMO ingredients in its store-brand items.

Mexico is the world's largest organic coffee grower. Its overall organic output includes more than 307,000 hectares of coffee, fruit, nuts, chocolate, amaranth, sesame seeds, vegetables, blue corn, and vanilla. Up to



now, some 85% has been for the export market but domestic shoppers are getting savvy. The fair was a way to strengthen their participation in the market.

An earlier undertaking with many of the same goals was the Red and Green Guide to GMO Foods, written by Mexican environmental activist Areli Carreon and published by Greenpeace Mexico in December 2005. It is a fascinating compendium and household must-have, listing the products and brands commonly available in Mexico together with a green classification for those that pass the non-GMO test or a red one for those that don't.

If you didn't already get the booklet at the fair, I would recommend you pick it up at <http://www.greenpeace.org/raw/content/mexico/press/reports/gu-a-roja-y-verde-de-alimentos.pdf> - and eat healthy.

Talli Nauman is a founder and co-director of Journalism to Raise Environmental Awareness, a project initiated with support from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation. This article originally appeared in her weekly column at The Herald Mexico - El Universal.

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