

Mexico: Front line of the global food war

Mexico is battling to revitalize indigenous corn, while the US seeks to stop the spread of a movement against GM food and agrichemicals., POLITICO, November 3, 2021 BY [GABRIELA GALINDO](#)

Mexico is rapidly turning into the main battleground in a cultural and commercial war over how the world grows its food — and it should come as no surprise that the conflict centers on the nation's most talismanic crop: corn.

It was, after all, in Mexico that people first cultivated maize from the [teosinte plant](#) 10,000 years ago. The country now boasts [64 different strains](#), which are mashed, fried and kneaded into [at least 600](#) traditional dishes, from tortilla flatbreads — which most Mexicans eat on a daily basis — to spicy pozole soup.

In an astonishing twist of fate, however, the country that first farmed the crop now vies with Japan to be the world's biggest importer, and buys mainly genetically modified maize from the giant farms of the United States, with which it finds it hard to compete.

It is the left-leaning populist president, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, who is now seeking to turn back that tide of U.S. products, as part of a broader push to revive national industries and support rural indigenous communities. In a shock declaration of war against Big Agri, he pledged last New Year's Eve to phase out GM corn by 2024, along with the ubiquitous pesticide glyphosate that is often sprayed on maize. The chemical is widely attacked by activists who argue that it [damages soil](#) and is a carcinogen. "Corn, this sacred plant, is from Mexico — yet we are the nation that imports the most corn around the world," he proclaimed back in his [inaugural speech](#) in 2018.

Mexico's maize mobilization exposes the [most active fault line in global food policy](#). The United States is increasingly worried that a European-led movement against GM products and pesticides will spread, throwing up barriers to trade. The U.S. Department of Agriculture is warning that if the European Union triumphs in the contest to set global norms in reducing agrichemicals and going organic, the world will suffer a double hammer blow of reduced output and soaring food prices.

For Washington, the danger is that this movement is no longer safely confined to notoriously GM-phobic and anti-pesticide French politicians 4,000 miles away, but has reached a massive market right on its border, and within its own free trade area. [In May](#), U.S. Trade

Representative Katherine Tai met Mexico's Economy Secretary Tatiana Clouthier to stress the importance of "science-and risk-based regulatory approaches in agriculture." Washington has long slammed the EU for not basing its reservations to GM on "sound science," but the challenge to modern agricultural orthodoxy is now uncomfortably close to home.

In response to the deindustrializing farming trends in Europe, the United States has launched a rival coalition of countries whose goal will be to maintain "sustainable productivity growth." In an initial list of partners last month, Washington said Brazil, Australia and the Philippines [were on all board](#). Mexico was not on the list.

Beyond the yellow

Most Americans and Europeans are used to maize kernels simply being a uniform yellow — but many Mexican small farmers would point to that being clear evidence of Big Agri's assault on the diversity of their heritage crop. In Mexico, don't be shocked to see corn speckled with pinks and blues.

“We have varieties that are white, creamy yellow, black, blue, red and dappled,” said Pánfilo Hernández Ortiz, a member of the Vicente Guerrero Group, which represents smallholder farmers in the central state of Tlaxcala, and advocates for traditional farming practices. Fittingly, Tlaxcala even means “place of the tortillas” in the Náhuatl language. “Here, every year, depending on the climate, each farmer adapts their practices and selects the seeds from their most resistant cobs to plant the next year.

“Young farmers inherit the seeds sowed by their families. They receive these seeds as an inheritance because families always keep and pass on the corn that they grew to the next generation,” said Hernández Ortiz, who grows corn himself. These traditions, he added, were important because they “represent the biocultural patrimony of these families, but also of their communities and of our country.”

In a 2017 [report](#), Mexico's national biodiversity commission CONABIO noted that some 2 million Mexican farmers continue to farm native maizes “throughout the [whole territory](#) in a diverse realm of agroecological conditions,” and that preserving this diversity is “indispensable” for present and future food security. The commission has also said that it is the very seed saving and exchanging methods kept alive by small and indigenous farmers that have given Mexico its more than 60 types of corn, which are all “adapted to different climates, soils and pests.”

Mexico’s deputy secretary for agriculture, Victor Suárez, said López Obrador's move against GM and glyphosate was part of a wider drive for food self-sufficiency. He explained it would help efforts to get smallholder farmers back on the country’s food grid after free trade deals like NAFTA, now renegotiated as the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA), opened the floodgates to tons of cheap, often subsidized products.

“Under these neoliberal policies, the Mexican countryside, and in particular peasant farming, were abandoned, because they were deemed non-competitive,” Suárez, a long-time ally of López Obrador, told POLITICO in a video interview, adding that the goal now was to “replace them with policies that placed small and medium-scale farmers at the heart of agriculture.”

A nationwide campaign, [No Country Without Corn](#) (Sin Maíz No Hay País), has been at the heart of this push. Launched in 2007 by small farmers, indigenous peoples and civil society groups, its main goal is to [shield](#) the [country’s heirloom corn varieties](#) from GM contamination and corporate capture. [Snubbed](#) for decades, the movement has been left to fend for itself in [the courts](#) to keep agrichemical firms (and governments friendly to big business) at bay. But it has now found an ear in the government of López Obrador, a veteran politician who has long vilified previous trade-oriented policies as a [handover](#) of Mexico’s national resources to big corporations at the expense of the environment and [livelihoods](#) of rural communities. Today, Mexico is [among the leading](#) buyers of corn, with imports accounting for about a third of national corn demand. [According to the Mexican government](#), 80 percent of the corn imported by Mexico was genetically modified, while about 35 percent of glyphosate imports go to corn farmers.

While López Obrador's New Year's Eve decree has [sparked criticism](#) over its lax wording, which stops short of imposing an outright ban, it also triggered [fierce corporate backlash](#) and warnings of food shortages and price hikes. North of the border, big agrichemical and farming groups have gone on a [lobbying spree](#), fearful of losing their [No. 1 market for GM corn](#). Even months ahead of the decree, former U.S. Trade Representative Robert Lighthizer [urged](#) Mexico to reverse course at the risk of “undermining the strength of our bilateral relationship” because it was turning away biotech goods and products that contained glyphosate.

In Mexico, agrichemical giants have also filed [dozens of unsuccessful appeals](#) against the plans, with glyphosate-maker Bayer-Monsanto the [latest](#) to suffer a setback. But Suárez said Mexico is not backing down on its push to revive its national corn industry. “We are committed to transitioning into an agri-food system

that is fair, healthy, sustainable and competitive,” he said. “The decree results from the government’s responsibility to shift toward a new paradigm in the way we produce and consume food.”

Keeping tortillas and tamales on the table

López Obrador's decree froze all glyphosate use and purchases by government agencies and mandated Mexico’s top scientific body, the CONACYT, to double down on research for alternatives.

It also formalized a ruling restricting GM corn cultivation in the country, obtained in 2013 via a [citizens’ lawsuit](#) by members of the No Country Without Corn campaign. In a [fresh legal victory](#) for the group, the country’s top court last month [upheld](#) the motion, citing the precautionary principle and rejecting a new round of appeals from agrichem giants Syngenta, Dow, Bayer-Monsanto and Corteva-DuPont (grouped under PHI Mexico). The precautionary principle is another favorite cornerstone of EU policy that gives regulators added flexibility to block products using a mantra of ultra caution.

Mercedes López, a representative of the civil lawsuit and head of the Organic Consumers Association, said the lawsuit had been key to safeguarding not only Mexico's panoply of corn varieties but also the millennia-old seed saving and breeding practices through which they were developed. “Without this motion, [GM] cultivation would have gone forward in the north of the country and all of these maize varieties would have been contaminated. We would have lost all of this richness,” she said.

But the government's agroecological vision just does not cut it for the National Farm Council (CNA), Mexico’s biggest farm lobby. Like The U.S., the CNA emphasized the big risks of collapsing food production in a developing market nation.

In a written statement to POLITICO, the group said giving up on glyphosate would result in a 40 percent drop in production of dietary staples like corn, coffee, chili or avocados, putting “more than 126 million Mexicans on the verge of a food crisis” and risked boosting the counterfeit market.

GM corn, it added, was essential for livestock farmers and the country’s popular beer, cereals and snack industries. “The decree puts the domestic supply of animal-origin products at risk, exposing us to increased imports of livestock goods.”

Suárez dismissed those concerns as fearmongering, saying the government was already pouring funds into a [range](#) of pro-small farmer and agroecological [programs](#) that have earned [praise](#) from top U.S. climate officials and which he said were “already proving that it is possible to produce without glyphosate, with more yield and lower costs.”

“The *campesino* families that we know farm our *criollo* [native] varieties are not worried about that,” said Hernández Ortiz, whose Vicente Guerrero Group was one of the farm groups that joined the 2013 lawsuit. “It is the companies who are worried [because] they are seeing their interests affected.”

Contacted by POLITICO, a spokesperson for Bayer Mexico provided a [statement](#), issued in May, insisting that glyphosate was safe. Bayer said it regretted that farmers were being denied “safe and efficient tools” to provide food for “the homes and tables of Mexican families.”

Green wave

Realizing the vision set out in the decree will be no mean feat for López Obrador. It would mean rowing back on decades of liberalizing, trade-oriented policies that [wiped out millions](#) of agricultural jobs, fuelling the very migratory flows that U.S. leaders have been pressuring Mexico to crack down on and which prompted imports of U.S. subsidized GM corn to skyrocket. Indeed, the decree sets the stage for a major shake-up in Mexico’s trade relations with key partners, such as the U.S.

The United States departments for trade and agriculture (USTR and USDA, respectively) did not respond to requests for comment.

Mexico's Suárez was adamant that relations with Mexico's northern neighbor remained positive, but said it was time to stop betting on big data and agritech innovations to make food production greener. While Washington has been touting technology as a way to go green, Suárez said it was just "more of the same."

Several U.S. farm groups are [continuing](#) to press U.S. officials to intervene and get Mexico to change course, while small farmer groups (on [both sides](#) of the border) and [nonprofits](#) are calling on Washington to back off. Some small U.S. farmers argue that Washington should focus on pushing a similar transition in its own farms, rather than in meddling in another country's policies.

"For decades we've pushed for policy reforms that support farmers to transition off of the treadmill of dependence on chemical inputs to increase productivity for overcoming systemic low prices," Jordan Treakle of the National Family Farm Coalition told POLITICO, adding that there was "no doubt" similar challenges would emerge with Europe, given that U.S. Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack "has similarly criticized EU attempts to reduce agro-chemicals through its [Farm to Fork strategy](#)."

Karen Hansen-Kuhn, a trade expert at the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy, said that while the U.S. could opt to act via certain biotech provisions under the USMCA with Mexico, there was no reason to assume that the move would undermine trade relations with Washington, since "there is sufficient non-GMO corn production in the U.S. to supply whatever the Mexican government might want."

Mexico's Suárez agreed there was "enormous potential" in the U.S. for non-GMO corn production. In a nod to the EU's efforts to rally support for its Farm to Fork vision via so-called "[green alliances](#)" with third countries, he also said Mexico was eyeing the EU's own efforts to upscale organic production in the bloc. "We are positioned in a new wave of cooperation, not competition, between countries," he said.