



Joint Public Advisory Committee (JPAC)
Comité Consultivo Público Conjunto (CCPC)
Comité consultatif public mixte (CCPM)

13 April 2004

The Honorable David Anderson
Minister of the Environment (Canada)

Ingeniero Alberto Cárdenas Jiménez
Secretary, Secretariat of the Environment and Natural Resources (Mexico)

Administrator Michael O. Leavitt
Administrator, United States Environmental Protection Agency

RE: Maize and biodiversity symposium of the Commission for Environmental Cooperation

Dear Council members:

The Joint Public Advisory Committee (JPAC) was pleased to participate in the CEC symposium on maize and biodiversity, held on 11 March 2004, in Oaxaca, Mexico. The event drew hundreds of participants, many of whom were indigenous peoples and *campesinos* who are directly affected and very much concerned with the issue of transgenic maize in Mexico. The organizers are to be congratulated for facilitating this broad representation.

The symposium succeeded in bringing a ‘human face’ to this very complex and controversial subject. Discussion at conferences and similar gatherings often tends to focus on scientific and technical aspects rather than human impacts and consequences. What we learned from our participation is that the conservation of biodiversity cannot be separated from the protection of cultural diversity. A better understanding and respect for the human and social context is called for in this debate. Indeed all analyses should be based on a broad understanding of sustainable development and the interplay of environmental, economic, social and cultural impacts.

In this context, we have several important thoughts and observations to share with you as the report is being finalized.

The first is that the emphasis on ‘scientific method’ and ‘science based’ conclusions can work to exclude indigenous peoples. The scientific method is based on a western worldview that is predominantly limited to the physical world that sees its objects of study as inanimate things. Since most of the Western World is based on the scientific method, its institutions of government, industry, business and academia are, for most part, limited to this worldview. Although scientists often claim that their study is objective, they express their values through their work. Unfortunately, when western scientific methods interact with indigenous worldviews, its own institutional biases and ethnocentric values become apparent. The indigenous worldview, as we were told, includes the spiritual, the emotional, the intellectual and, of course, the physical. The arguments expressed by participants at the symposium clearly articulated how traditional food production and consumption are expressions of cultures that have been sustained by a respect for nature rather than a desire to control it.

It was also quite apparent at the symposium that the authors of the various chapters were unable to respond to the many indigenous presenters who attempted to discuss and articulate their relationship with maize as sacred, the center of life, their brother and part of their dignity and identify. We must also not underestimate the intellectual capability of the indigenous people in the region. Their understanding of maize biodiversity is based on 6,000 years of practice, observation and spiritual insight. Their opinions on the effects of transgenic maize should be carefully considered and evaluated.

Secondly, there is an obvious imbalance in the composition of the Advisory Group. The majority of the members are from academia, industry and NGOs. Indigenous people are a minor component of the Committee. This imbalance fails to recognize the importance and the significance of indigenous thought in addressing this question. Disqualifying indigenous people on the basis of language and scientific credentials is, in our opinion, a form of institutional discrimination. Ideally, there should have been an equal balance of indigenous peoples and scientists on the Advisory Group.

This imbalance may result in the promotion of a position that is directly contrary to the views of the indigenous peoples in the area. Western institutions have great faith in the scientific method. Indigenous peoples, for most part, are sceptical of western science and, instead, they have great faith in their own traditional practices and methods.

We learned much about scientific uncertainty at the symposium, both from the formal presentations and from the public interventions. JPAC is expecting that the final report will address the scope of this uncertainty. There is a very strong case to be made here for governments to apply the precautionary principle in their decision-making processes, to require that industry be comprehensive when submitting rationale and to create space for public debate. Minimally, a moratorium on imports of transgenic corn to Mexico should be put in place until the risks to human health, cultural integrity of maize producers in Mexico and the environment generally are better understood and appropriate long-term decisions can be made.

Finally, we are very concerned about the analysis of benefits and risks discussed at the symposium. It appears that the corporations share most of the benefits and the producers and the environment share most of the risks. It can be argued that the identification of benefits and risks is a value judgment, thus great care should be taken about how these benefits and risks are described.

We are looking forward to the publication of this report and a fulsome discussion on the contents of the final report and identification of specific follow-up actions during the June Council Session in Puebla, Mexico.

Sincerely,

[Original signed]

Donna Tingley
JPAC Chair for 2004

cc. CEC Alternate Representatives
CEC Executive Director
CEC Director of Programs
Head, Environment, Economy and Trade program
Maize Advisory Group of the CEC Secretariat
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