

## WIKILEAKS MEMOS REVEAL US GOVERNMENT PUSHING GENE-ALTERED CROPS WORLDWIDE<sup>1</sup>

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Wikileaks has so far released just a fraction of the total 251,287 United States embassy cables in its possession, but the documents currently available provide interesting insights into how aggressively the U.S. State Department is pushing genetically modified organisms (GMOs) abroad.

**THE DETAILS:** In one cable, an unnamed State Department official tells a Pakistan finance minister, who notes that drought and water issues remain a primary barrier to increasing the country's agricultural capacity, that "the integration of genetically modified seeds is critical to increasing agricultural productivity." The official then requested "enhanced U.S.–Pakistan collaboration" on biotechnology research.

State Department officials have also been fighting the European Union's tight labeling restrictions on GMOs, as evidenced by cables involving Spanish and Austrian officials and French President Nicolas Sarkozy. GMOs are described as "a subject of considerable domestic concern in France," according to one cable dated 2007. Soon after taking office, Sarkozy considered a moratorium on GMOs that "would significantly undermine U.S. agricultural exports to Europe. We believe President Sarkozy may support the politically popular moratorium in order to gain capital to use in his reform efforts." A cable describing the current (as of August 2009) political climate in Austria notes that the country's ban on GMOs is just one of its overall "isolationist, anti-EU, and anti-U.S. positions."

Such European push-back has led U.S. GMO advocates to seek the help of Europe's few GMO sympathizers. One of the released cables describes a meeting between Senators Charles Grassley (R-Iowa) and John Thune (R-S.D.) and two officials from Spain, which is one of the only European countries currently growing genetically modified crops (Poland is the other). One of the Spanish officials noted that Spain "had a relatively 'liberal' view with respect to biotechnology. However, even in Spain, the technology was controversial and faced NGO opposition." The two senators then asked "what influence Spain could exercise in Brussels [the de facto capital of the European Union] on the issue," to which the Spanish officials responded "commodity price hikes might spur greater liberalization to biotech imports."

Finally, the cables reveal that Africa is a potential goldmine for U.S. biotech companies that are trying to find new markets for their products. In one cable, among the priorities for intelligence officials in Burundi, the Congo, and Rwanda is gathering information on "government acceptance of genetically modified food and propagation of genetically modified crops."

**WHAT IT MEANS:** Biotech firms like Monsanto are trying to get their products into as many corners of the globe as possible and are using politicians to pave the way. That's probably not surprising to many people, and it's certainly nothing new for Michael Hansen, PhD, a senior scientist at the nonprofit Consumers Union (which publishes *Consumer Reports*), who's been following international food politics for quite some time. "We've been fighting the State Department for years over this," he says. For 18 years, the State Department and its colleagues

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in the U.S. Department of Agriculture's foreign agriculture service have been trying to weaken international regulations on the labeling of genetically modified foods, particularly in the European Union, which has adopted a zero-tolerance policy on GMOs, he says. And now, they've turned their attention to Africa. "Africa is seen as a continent that's been left behind and needs help—it's good PR stuff for them," he says. "But Africa doesn't particularly want it."

"The State Department has been mandated and budgeted to push GMOs for several years," says Jeffery Smith, founder of the Institute for Responsible Technology, a nonprofit devoted to educating the public about the risks of genetically modified crops. "It is a consistent but misguided policy based on false information."

For instance, in the cable involving the Pakistani official, "the U.S. rep gives completely unscientific and misleading information," he says. "No drought-tolerant GM crop has ever been commercialized." That's likely because the few drought-tolerant crops that have been tested don't actually perform well in any conditions but droughts, says Hansen. "Under drought conditions, GMO crops do increase yields, but under normal water conditions, it yields less," he says, which makes GMOs an even harder sell in African nations, where droughts are common and food security is on rocky ground as it is.

As biotech companies are pouring millions of dollars into the development of drought-tolerant crops, nonprofit sustainable-agriculture groups are showing that native varieties of GM crops are a much better solution. Hansen says that CIMMYT, a Mexican nonprofit whose name translates to the International Center for the Improvement of Corn and Wheat, has released 50 native varieties of corn that produce 25 to 50 percent higher yields under drought conditions than GMOs. Other groups, including the International Assessment of Agricultural Knowledge, Science and Technology for Development and the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization have recently come out saying that the solution to world hunger isn't greater reliance on GMOs but on biodiversity and sustainable agriculture systems. "But the private sector is never going to put money in that because there's no way to privatize it," Hansen says. "You can't patent a crop rotation."

Ultimately, what these cables reveal is that U.S. biotech companies, and the government officials they support, are desperately trying to find new markets in the face of rapidly declining popularity. "Even in Spain and Poland, the only countries in the European Union where there's GMO acreage, attitudes have dropped dramatically," says Hansen. "They're desperately trying to get that acceptance." And in some cases they're doing so at the expense of taxpayers. USAID, a division of the State Department that supports international development, spent \$200 million in 2009 on "food security response" programs designed to alleviate world hunger by improving agricultural productivity. One of the main ways they do that is through promoting the use of biotechnology and GMO crops, which, as stated earlier, may be useless in fighting world hunger due to their inability to consistently increase crop yields. One of its biotechnology success stories USAID likes to tout is that of genetically modified eggplants for India, which were ultimately rejected by Indian farmers skeptical of GM crops after Monsanto's Bt corn led them into huge debt (anti-GMO activist Vandana Shiva estimates that 200,000 Indian farmers committed suicide because of financial debt linked to Bt cotton).

### **Want to stop the worldwide flood of GMOs? Here are a few ways to start:**

- (1) **Buy organic.** So much of our food is imported nowadays that buying organic is a good way to encourage farmers abroad to adopt sustainable farming practices, rather than GMOs,

which are banned in organic products. And, as always, buy local organic food as much as you can, to support GMO-free farmers at home, too.

- (2) **Get verified.** If you can't find a certified-organic version of what you're looking for, look for the "Non-GMO Project Verified" seal. That goes for dietary supplements, as well, which can't be certified as organic but often contain soy-based fillers (soy that's not grown with organic methods is very likely to come from GMOs). You can search for GMO-free products on the organization's website, where you can also download a PDF shopping guide or the group's new iPhone app.