

To be or not to be GE-free

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Genetically engineered (GE) foods and seeds remain a tough sell in parts of Europe, Asia and Latin America. Restrictions emerging across the globe stem from a range of concerns, from protecting biodiversity and public health to fostering economic independence and food sovereignty.

In April, Hungary became the first country to ensure its people's "material and mental health" by guaranteeing "an agriculture free of genetically modified organisms" in its new [Fundamental Law](#). All told, 7 European countries have rejected one or more GE crops.

Introducing GE food has even hit a road bump in the United States. On June 16, the Republican-controlled House included a bi-partisan [amendment](#) to an appropriations bill to "prohibit use of FDA funds to approve any application for approval of genetically engineered salmon."

Standing up to Monsanto

Monsanto has been promoting its agricultural GE technologies aggressively throughout Latin America for almost two decades. Yet [El Salvador](#), the third country in Latin America to have introduced GE crops, has recently changed course. It launched a cooperative program linking government, peasant organizations and NGOs to ensure that by 2014 all corn and bean seeds needed at home will be produced by Salvadorean farmers, not bought from Monsanto or other foreign companies. As he inaugurated the program, Salvadorean President Funes declared:

Only if we become independent in seed [production], will we become independent in food, that is to say, can we achieve food sovereignty.

The GE tide is turning in other parts of the world as well:

- In [Cyprus](#), a new law mandates prominent signs stating clearly which foods contain GE ingredients, and that they be shelved separately. Earlier similar laws had failed under pressure from the U.S. government.
- [Thailand](#), one of the world's largest rice exporters, has had a GE-free rice policy for years. Its "Rice Strategy" protects a thousand-year-old heritage while maintaining consumer

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- confidence in the quality and safety of Thai rice and supporting rice farmers' livelihoods.
- Protecting biodiversity was a key motivator for the [Peruvian](#) Congress when it recently set a 10-year moratorium on the cultivation and breeding of GE crops.

Some welcome mats still out

The tide has not turned everywhere. In [Brazil](#), the commission charged with evaluating and authorizing GE crops recently fast-tracked release of GE beans — a staple for millions of Brazilians — and has now changed internal rules to speed up other approvals. This despite the fact that the government research agency that developed the GE beans found, after 8 years of experiments, that the pests this GE variety was developed to control could be easily managed with organic control methods without reducing yields.

In [Chile](#), legislators recently passed a law which will effectively grant Monsanto patent rights over the majority of seeds used to grow crops in that country. Peasants and Indigenous farmers will no longer be able to save seeds from a harvest for future planting, and will have to buy Monsanto's seeds.

A decade-long moratorium on GE seeds in [Mexico](#) was broken in 2009, when the government approved 29 applications for experimental GE corn plots. Another 20 plots were approved in 2010. Mindful of revelations in 2001 by UC Berkeley's Ignacio Chapela (a former PAN board member) that GE traits were showing up in native strains of maize, Mexican officials have remained wary of moving towards commercial planting of GE corn, in part because Mexico is the center of origin of corn.

While Mexican officials call for additional studies to determine GE's effects on native varieties, Monsanto continues to aggressively lobby the government. Meanwhile, protests against risking native corn contamination are gaining momentum across the country.

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