Controlling seeds: International delegation comes to Saskatchewan
By Darrin Qualman, National Farmers Union (NFU)

"My name is Melina Hernández. I am Zapoteca from Oaxaca Mexico. Our corn has been contaminated"—So began a presentation by Mexican farm leader and social justice activist Melina Hernández Sosa. ("Oaxaca" is pronounced wa ha' ka.)

Sosa was speaking to over 120 people in Saskatoon on March 7, 2005—one stop on a week-long series of public forums and political meetings. The events were designed to help citizens and policy-makers understand the costs and risks of the genetically-modified (GM) crops that the Canadian government is aggressively promoting around the world. In addition to Sosa, farmers and scientists from India, Ethiopia, and Canada addressed the meetings.

Sosa's state of Oaxaca rolls up from the Pacific coast into the mountains of south-central Mexico. The state contains a rich diversity of corn varieties—both ancient and relatively-modern. Mexico is the place where corn was developed as a food crop for humans. Sosa told of how, over the past 10,000 years, the women and men who live in the area we now call Mexico worked to created many, many varieties of corn: corn varieties tailored for Mexican climate and geography, including corn varieties designed to be planted at sea level, and varieties designed to be planted above 3,000 metres.

Sosa told of widespread contamination of Mexican corn by GM varieties marketed by Monsanto and other transnational seed and gene corporations. She said that she and many Mexican activists and farmers had long called on that country's government to test corn to determine the extent of contamination. The government refused. So environmental and civil society organizations undertook the tests themselves in 11 Mexican states; they found widespread contamination in 9. They also found that some corn plants contained more than one modified gene. In extreme cases, an individual plant would contain three separate modified genes: a gene for resistance to the chemical glyphosate (commonly called the "Roundup Ready" gene), a gene that causes the plant to produce its own biological insecticide (the "Bt" gene); and a gene referred to as "Starlink." Starlink corn is genetically engineered to produce a variant of the Bt insecticide, but because the Starlink variant has a dramatically-increased potential to trigger allergic reactions in humans, Starlink corn was approved in the U.S. for use in animal feed, but not for human consumption. Sosa said that widespread contamination by GM Starlink corn, in Mexico and Canada alike, is a clear human health risk.

In addition to genetic pollution, Sosa told of a torrent of cheap U.S. corn that has flooded into Mexico, driving down prices and eroding food security in that country. As a result of neo-liberal policies of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank, and a recent succession of Mexican governments, she said, farmers in that country have been deprived of agencies and programs that formerly stabilized the price of corn and beans—staples in the Mexican diet. As Mexican farmers have been forced to get by on low and manipulated "world prices", they have also had to fight for their own domestic markets against U.S. corn. Sosa said that the world price of corn is 20% below the cost of producing it—the cost of in Mexico, and also in the U.S. and Canada. Once self-sufficient, Mexico now imports nearly 25% of its corn, much of it genetically-modified—one source of the contamination now sweeping through Mexico.

Sosa asked meeting participants and Canadian policymakers to imagine corn as more than just a commodity, more than just a global trade-good. "In Mexico, corn is part of us; it's part of our culture, part of our spirituality. Corn is our food, we use it for medicine, it is part of our body, it is our sister," said Sosa. She, like the speakers from Asia and Africa, painted a picture of rich indigenous knowledge and a resilient agriculture based on diversity and on varieties tailored to climate, geography, and local needs. That knowledge and that form of agriculture is under attack as government and corporations seek to export a mono-ideological form of agriculture based on mass-produced, GM seeds controlled by some of the planet's most powerful, profitable, and aggressive corporations.

The Canadian government is aggressively promoting GM crops around the world—billing them as a savior for suffering farmers. The international delegation that came to Canada wanted to tell Canadians that their government had not conferred with those most affected by Canadian promotion of GM crops: the farmers in the recipient nations. Small farmers in these nations see GM crops as a threat because the proliferation of such crops threatens to destroy the biodiversity and knowledge built up over thousands of years. This knowledge and biodiversity forms the base of agriculture in developing nations, and also in countries such as Canada. The delegation said that agro-biodiversity is a proven and valuable alternative to input-intensive, industrial agriculture but that the two systems are in conflict, with the latter—through genetic contamination and corporate takeover of the seed system—doing great damage to the former.

Ironically, in promoting GM seeds and input-intensive agriculture as a replacement for agriculture based on self-sufficiency and diversity, Canada is seeking to replace one of the most profitable forms of agriculture with one of the least. Based on market returns (before subsidies are added in), Canadian farmers lose nearly $100 on every acre. Most farmers in India, Mexico, and Ethiopia earned small but positive returns. While many peasants feed their children by farming 1 to 10 acres, most Canadian farmers can't feed their children by farming 1,000 acres (without off-farm paycheques and government subsidies). Ironically, Canada is seeking to export and proliferate the least-profitable model of agriculture in the world.

Research around the world confirms the superior profitability of traditional agriculture based on agronomic self-sufficiency and diversity. P. V. Satheesh, a delegation member from India, cited figures for exhaustive studies that compared Indian farmers' net returns on genetically-engineered cotton compared to traditional varieties of cotton. Farmers utilizing traditional seeds and practices had far higher net returns.

Control

Over and over, throughout the meetings in Saskatoon, the theme of control came up. But the issue of control has an ironic twist: on the one hand, gene and seed transnationals are failing to control the spread of contamination from GM seeds; but on the other hand, these companies are using mergers, patents, and Plant Breeders' Rights (PBR) legislation to gain *tighter control* of the world's seed supply and to suppress competition. Even as they are losing control of their genes, they are working to heighten their control over their profits and over farmers.

In addressing the Saskatoon meeting, National Farmers Union President Stewart Wells thanked the international delegation and pointed toward Canada's promotion of Terminator

Technology on the world stage. Terminator Technology uses genetic modification to make seeds sterile after one generation. Farmers can buy the seeds and plant them and grow a crop, but they cannot save and re-use the seed because it is sterile. Terminator is seen by some as a technical fix for GM seed contamination, as a way of controlling wayward genes. Canada recently promoted Terminator at an international meeting in Thailand.

Wells picked up on the theme of Canada's promotion of Terminator Technology at home and abroad and linked it to new efforts by the government to bring in Draconian Plant Breeders' Rights (PBR) legislation, calling the proposed Canadian amendments "Terminator legislation." The proposed amendments to Canada's *PBR Act* would dramatically restrict farmers' use of seeds and transfer the right to save and re-use seeds—a right held by farmers for thousands of years—to companies such as Monsanto. The legislation proposes giving farmers a "privilege" to transgress Monsanto's "right."

Wells said that the Canadian government's picture of the future is one based on Terminator Technology that creates seeds that won't grow, and on Terminator legislation that creates seeds that farmers can't plant. "It's crazy to base our food system on seeds that won't grow," said Wells, "and equally crazy to strip citizens of their age-old right to save and re-use seed and to confer that right onto a foreign transnational notorious for punishing farmers."

Wells, Sosa, the other international experts, and the citizens that attended various public meetings were unanimous in their criticism of the Canadian government's decision to promote GM seed and Terminator Technologies and to attempt to proliferate the failed vision of input-intensive agriculture that has proven so economically and environmentally unsustainable in Canada.

In addition to the public forum in Saskatoon on March 7, there was also a strategy session in that city where activists discussed the international resistance to the spread of GM crop technologies. On the same day, there were meetings and a public forum in Montreal. On March 8, the international delegation and Canadian organizations met with the Senate Committee on Foreign Affairs in Ottawa. On March 9, they met with 25 government officials in Ottawa and held a public forum in that city attended by over 600 people. The delegation had breakfast with MPs on Thursday.

The meetings and events were made possible by the generous support and participation of Canadian Organic Growers, Council of Canadians, Development and Peace, ETC Group, Friends of the Earth, Inter Pares, OPIRG Carleton, OPIRG Ottawa, Polaris Institute, Sierra Club of Canada Social Justice Committee, United Church of Canada, USC Canada, and the National Farmers Union (NFU).

Anna Paskal of Inter Pares accompanied the international delegation to Saskatoon.

The NFU would like to acknowledge the Saskatchewan Council for International Co-operation (SCIC) for helping support the NFU's work on these issues.