NGOs: Mexico risks corn damage if GM maize is planted

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A woman from Xochimilco takes part in the celebration of the 'National Day of Corn' in Zocalo Square in Mexico City in 2011. Environmentalists are warning that Mexico, the cradle of corn, risks damaging its staple if the government gives US firms the green light to plant genetically-modified maize in huge swaths of land.

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The agriculture ministry is examining the possibility of allowing Monsanto, DuPont and Dow to plant GMO corn in 2.4 million hectares (six million acres) of land, but no decision has been taken yet.

"Every indication shows that a decision could be taken in the coming

weeks," Silvia Ribero, a spokeswoman for the Canada-based ETC Group, which monitors the ecological impact of new technologies on poor regions, told AFP on Tuesday.

She said President Felipe Calderon could give his authorization before he leaves office on December 1. She noted that the sowing season starts next month.

But Agriculture Minister Francisco Mayorga said Monday that legal papework was still missing and that he did not think that it would be approved under the Calderon administration.

"We won't force things," Mayorga told the daily El Economista.

The government has defended the introduction of biotechnology in order to reduce food imports. Last year, the Calderon administration authorized Monsanto to start field trials for GM corn.

The ETC Group and the Maize Defense Network, a Mexican non-governmental organization, fear the consequences of allowing biotech firms to plant in land roughly the size of El Salvador.

"We are talking about damaging more than 7,000 years of indigenous and peasant work that created maize—one of the world's three most widely eaten crops," Veronica Villa of ETC's Mexico office said in a statement last week.

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