

International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture

WHAT IS IT?

The International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture is a technical, international agreement that aims to enhance global food security through the access and exchange of materials used to improve seeds. Germplasm – seeds – are the backbone of agricultural innovation. Under the Treaty, a Standard Material Transfer Agreement ensures that the terms for access to germplasm are uniform and transparent for all contracting parties.

WHY DO WE NEED ACCESS TO FOREIGN GERMPLASM?

The global food system is interdependent. Seventy percent of the food we eat and grow comes from crops that are not native to the U.S. International exchange of plant materials dates back millennia from Native Americans who introduced corn into the northern continent. Gene banks are places to collect and protect seeds and make them available to plant breeders, and it is widely recognized that the United States has among the best in the world through USDA's National Plant Germplasm System (NPGS). However, the NPGS gene banks are not all-encompassing. The U.S. still needs to access genetic resources from other countries, many of which are Parties to the Treaty.

WILL ACCESS TO GLOBAL PLANT MATERIALS STRENGTHEN AMERICAN AGRICULTURE?

Without a doubt. Other countries' gene banks may hold critical germplasm that U.S. researchers could breed into domestic crops. There are many factors that can and have had devastating consequences for farmers - like evolving plant pests and diseases, and changing climates.

CAN U.S. RESEARCHERS ACCESS GERMPLASM WITHOUT RATIFICATION?

Yes, but that access is not guaranteed and is increasingly becoming more uncertain. There have already been instances where public sector researchers were unable to access the germplasm they needed because the costs were too high.

WHAT IS THE HISTORY OF THE INTERNATIONAL TREATY?

The U.S. was integrally involved in negotiating the finalized treaty and signed it in 2002 during the Bush administration. In December of 2010, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee recommended ratification on a voice vote. However, the treaty is still pending, and the last committee hearing to consider it was in November, 2009.



WHY SHOULD THE INTERNATIONAL TREATY BE RATIFIED NOW?

Previously, ratification was a less urgent matter. However, now that the Nagoya Protocol under the Convention on Biological Diversity is in force, there is a great deal of uncertainty around the rules for exchanging germplasm. Much germplasm is effectively locked by the uncertainty created by evolving Nagoya rules. Also, Parties to the Treaty are discussing how to improve its functionality and make it more user-friendly like our NPGS. The United States cannot afford to be left out of these discussions. A single, simple system ensuring facilitated access to germplasm globally is needed by public and private breeders alike.

WOULD ANY U.S. LAWS NEED TO CHANGE IN ORDER TO RATIFY THE TREATY?

No. Ratification of the International Treaty would require no new laws, and it would not require any appropriations from Congress. The Treaty enjoys bipartisan support, as well as strong support from private industry and public researchers. The Treaty would not alter access to U.S. gene banks by U.S. researchers, nor would it compromise existing intellectual property protections.

WHO SUPPORTS RATIFICATION?

More than 80 companies and organizations support ratification of the International Treaty. These groups include the American Seed Trade Association, American Farm Bureau Federation, American Society of Plant Biologists, Crop Science Society, Association of Public and Land-grant Universities' Board on Agriculture Assembly, National Wheat Growers Association, National Corn Growers Association, and National Farmers Union.



Did You Know?

- Most commercially grown corn in the U.S. is based on one of the several hundred races of maize. Breeders are constantly looking for genetic diversity that can help address pests, diseases, cold, and drought without reducing important quality and yield factors.
- Even though the sunflower is native to the U.S., breeders still must use global resources to develop varieties that are better able to handle drought, heat and soil salinity.
- International collections hold wild races of strawberries that can help breeders develop plants and berries that are resistant to pests and cold, but have the same red color and juicy taste that we love.
- Wheat is a truly global crop with twenty percent of the world's calories coming from wheat products. Hessian fly was a devastating problem in U.S. wheat production until resistance was found in samples of wheat from the Middle East. African varieties have been a source of resistance to rusts. Wheat varieties from Russia could hold the key for better cold tolerance for winter wheat in the U.S. which can be devastated by late frosts.
- Potato is the most widely grown and consumed vegetable in the U.S. and the world. Almost all modern varieties have exotic germplasm in their pedigrees.

RATIFICATION IS CRITICAL.

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

Senate Foreign Relations Committee:
www.foreign.senate.gov/treaties/110-19

U.S. State Department:
www.state.gov/s/l/treaty/pending/index.htm

America Seed Trade Association:
<http://www.betterseed.org>



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