



## Crop biodiversity treaty OK'd

**International effort will promote conservation, encourage equal distribution of profits** | [By Charles Q Choi](#)

An international treaty on the conservation of biodiversity in agriculture will be the first such to become law in June after more than 40 countries ratified it late last month. The [International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture](#) will promote national and international laws for the conservation and sustainable use of the many varieties of the world's crops, as well as equitable distribution of benefits from seed use.

In return, participating nations should profit from enhanced access to genetic resources and exchange of information, transfer of technology, and growth of scientific and technological capacity in plant breeding and biotechnology, according to treaty organizers.

"The purpose here is to facilitate access to genetic resources for breeding and research. In my opinion, scientists may be the main beneficiaries of the treaty," José Esquinas-Alcázar, secretary of the United Nations' [Food and Agriculture Organization](#) (FAO)'s [Commission on Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture](#), told *The Scientist*.

Biodiversity in agriculture has dropped sharply in modern times. Since the beginning of agriculture, Esquinas-Alcázar said, the world's farmers have developed roughly 10,000 plant species for use in food and fodder production. Today, only 150 crops feed most people, and just 12 crops provide 80% of dietary energy, with rice, wheat, maize, and potato alone providing 60%.

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“You need genetic diversity in agriculture to face unpredictable environmental changes, including climatic changes and unpredictable human needs. You need to be able to select solutions to these, and you can only select from diversity, instead of from uniformity,” Esquinas-Alcázar said.

The accord, popularly known as the [International Seed Treaty](#), was adopted in 2001 by the FAO after 7 years of negotiations with some 180 countries. It was set to take effect 90 days after at least 40 governments ratified it. Eleven European nations, Egypt, and the European Community added their ratifications March 31, bringing [the number to 48](#). It will go into force June 29. The treaty's governing body will consist of those governments that ratified it.

“The challenge now is to ensure that the treaty becomes operative in all countries,” Esquinas-Alcázar said. The United States and 47 other nations have signed but not yet ratified the treaty.

The core of the treaty is its multilateral system for access to and benefit sharing from plant genetic resources of 64 key food crops and 29 forage species. “What the multilateral system tries to do is reduce transaction costs,” Esquinas-Alcázar said. “Let's say you have more than 100 different varieties from 20 to 30 different countries providing the material for the production of a commercial variety. You can't imagine how costly it would be to have separate bilateral agreements with each donor country. A multilateral system of sharing information will simplify a tremendous and costly bureaucratic mechanism.”

The system also provides for sharing of profits arising from utilization, including that from commercialization of new varieties by the private sector. How this will be legally enacted has yet to be decided, but should be negotiated by the governing body of the treaty at its first meeting, “presumably within 1 year,” Esquinas-Alcázar said.

“We're very pleased with the treaty. It's got a lot of work to do—for instance, the governing body needs to think about whether and how to expand the list of crops covered by the multilateral system,” said Patrick Mulvany, senior policy advisor for the [Intermediate Technology Development Group](#) (ITDG), a developing nations aid group headquartered in Bourton, UK.

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Mulvany said that fairly large financial commitments will be necessary to implement the plans the treaty calls for “to make sure the treaty means something and is not just a piece of paper.” Moreover, ITDG feels the treaty should clarify its position concerning seed patenting and ensure seeds are kept in the public domain.

Esquinas-Alcázar said that nations are currently discussing global strategies in terms of conserving animal genetic resources in agriculture as well.

“There really is a huge urgency there in that livestock breeds are disappearing at twice the rate of crop varieties, with some estimates at 5% per annum,” Mulvany said. The FAO is scheduled to discuss the matter in greater length in November.

**Links for this article**

International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture

<http://www.fao.org/ag/cgrfa/itpgr.htm>

Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations

<http://www.fao.org>

Commission on Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture

<http://www.fao.org/ag/cgrfa/Default.htm>

International Seed Treaty

<http://www.ukabc.org/iu2.htm>

Participants, International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture

<http://www.fao.org/Legal/TREATIES/033s-e.htm>

Intermediate Technology Development Group

<http://www.itdg.org/>

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