

'Noah's Ark' seed vault opens

by Bend_Weekly_News_Sources

A vault designed to protect various seed varieties for future generations opened Feb. 26 on a remote Arctic island. The Svalbard Global Seed Vault, a project of the Norwegian government, received in August shipments of 100 million seeds that originated in over 100 countries.

The seed vault's entrance juts out from a mountainside. (Credit: Mari Tefre/Global Crop Diversity Trust)

With deposits ranging from unique varieties of African rice and Asian food staples such as maize, rice, wheat, cowpea, and sorghum to European and South American varieties of eggplant, lettuce, barley, and potato, the first deposits represented what of officials called the most comprehensive and diverse collection of food crop seeds held anywhere. At the opening ceremony, Norwegian Prime Minister Jens Stoltenberg unlocked the chamber and, with African Nobel Peace Prize-winning environmentalist Wangari Maathai, placed the first seeds inside. European Commission President José Manuel Barroso along with dignitaries and agricultural experts from around the globe deposited additional seeds. Norwegian musicians also performed at the opening ceremony, held 130 meters deep in a frozen mountain. Built near the village of Longyearbyen on the island of Spitsbergen, Norway, the vault at its inception contains 268,000 distinct seed samples each from a different farm or field. Each sample may contain hundreds of seeds or more. In all, the day's shipments weighed some 10 tons. The vault is part of what its proponents call an unprecedented effort to protect the planet's rapidly diminishing biodiversity. The genetic diversity of crops is essential for food production, yet scientists say it's being lost. The vault, dug deep into the frozen rock of an Arctic mountain, is meant to secure for centuries, or longer, hundreds of millions of seeds representing every important crop variety available in the world today. As well as protecting against the daily loss of biodiversity, the vault is also seen as a last-resort bulwark for restarting agricultural production at the regional or global level in the wake of a natural or man-made disaster. Conservationists for climate change have been worked into the plan. Even in the worst-case scenarios of global warming, the vault rooms will remain naturally frozen for up to 200 years, its designers say. "With climate change and other forces threatening the diversity of life that sustains our planet, Norway is proud to be playing a central role in creating a facility capable of protecting what are not just seeds, but the fundamental building blocks of human civilization," said Norwegian Prime Minister Jens Stoltenberg.

Courtesy Global Crop Diversity Trust and World Science staff

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