

The Culturally-Informed Community Seed Pledge

“I respect the natural rights of seeds and their people by producing CICS-Pledged seeds under the pledge’s culturally-informed practices and code of ethics. I am including this Pledge with any transfer of seeds or their derivatives to ask others to continue following these guidelines.”

Purpose:

This **pledge** provides an evaluation metric for small seed industry accountability and a market enhancement measure to help consumers identify companies, seed growers and/or farmers committed to equity and increased cultural competency in their seed work.

The pledge is available for small-scale seed companies, seed industry stakeholders, and nonprofit organizations that focus on seed work to sign to adopt changes to their practices and to maintain ethical seed industry standards.

We think that a culturally-informed community seed **code of ethics** is necessary to ensure protections for communities of origin, minoritized seed keepers, and culturally-meaningful seeds.

Examples of settings for its intended use include:

- commercial and non-commercial settings, specifically for work related to **plant breeding** conducted by for profit and/or nonprofit organizations;
- **circulation of seeds** via seed swaps at seed conferences, seed libraries, online seed exchanges and other venues, or **seed share** programs;
- and/or **importing/collecting seeds** of other cultures for commercial production either via germplasm collections, international expeditions or other ways.

We prepared this pledge based on our years of collective experience, struggles and the challenges we faced in the seed industry as minoritized farmers, seed keepers and farm business owners. We don’t claim that it is the ultimate solution as an accountability metric; however, we hope that it is a helpful contribution to ongoing efforts toward an equitable and just seed system.

The CICS/COE is intended to be a living pledge open to revisions as understandings of what it takes to build such a system continue to evolve.

Pledge Points:

What are culturally and community-meaningful seeds?

Culturally and community-meaningful seeds come from plants that have retained ancestral, traditional, or cultural relationships with specific communities and places of origin.

The Culturally-Informed Community Seed Rights

- 1) The right of culturally and community-meaningful seeds to maintain their connections to people, place, and history
- 2) The right of culturally and community-meaningful seeds to be used and sourced ethically
- 3) The right of culturally and community-meaningful seeds to produce equitable benefit sharing when subject to commercialization or research
- 4) The right of culturally and community-meaningful seeds to be stewarded respectfully when marketed, selected, adapted, or used for plant breeding

What are the **three main areas of change** offered by the Culturally-Informed Community Seed Code of Ethics?

- 1) Ethical Seed Sourcing and the Use of Plant Germplasm
- 2) Equitable Benefits Sharing
- 3) Respectful Stewardship

Read the **Code of Ethics** below to evaluate your practices and identify if you're ready to sign the CICS Pledge:

The Culturally-Informed Community Seed Code of Ethics

The **change** and **practices** needed to honor the Culturally-Informed Community Seed Rights:

1) Ethical Seed Sourcing and the Use of Plant Germplasm

Practices ☒

➤ Standards for Ethical Germplasm Use and Plant Breeding.

- ☐ I am informed by and collaborate with communities whose seeds I'm using for research or commercialization when I have no meaningful cultural or ancestral connections to the seeds' place of origin.
- ☐ I keep detailed records and operate with transparency about how I use seeds including how seeds move through my company, institution, or organization.
- ☐ I implement protocols for ethics training for myself and/or anyone else in my company, institution, or organization who will be working with seeds.
 - I follow these protocols for use of all germplasm and seeds obtained from the USDA, other publicly funded collections, and/or acquired from private individuals or communities for plant breeding or commercial market purposes; and ensure all individuals I am responsible for do the same.
- ☐ I obtain consent from and offer collaboration with stewards of seeds and/or their communities **whenever possible** for seeds not available in the commercial domain when working with those seeds for plant breeding purposes.

➤ Culturally-Ethical Preservation of Genetic Plant Material

- ☐ I am taking measures to improve my practices to ensure that seed acquisitions and other genetic material are **collected** or **shared** with **informed consent** and **equitable agreements** for compensation, rematriation, distribution, access, and/or usage.
- ☐ I acknowledge that rules for reciprocity with an international community may have already been violated decades or centuries ago by my current government through extractive practices. If/When I use one-way germplasm import permits that are approved by my government and/or travel to global communities to collect seeds, **I go beyond just giving**

gifts in exchange for seeds. I know this has been used to justify past resource exploitation so I collaborate with communities to identify additional methods for equitable exchange.

- ☐ I implement protocols for cataloging and storage in tandem with correct cultural and community information.
- ☐ I take measures to increase agency for communities I work with to make their own requests for genetic plant material from germplasm collections for preservation, food security and community-based plant breeding purposes.
- ☐ I acknowledge that many perennial plants are culturally meaningful to regional or international communities and exist within specific ecosystems in a reciprocal relationship with humans and other living beings. **I do not uproot** these plants to plant them in the local ecosystem where I conduct seed work which may cause economic and/or ecological harm to the communities of origin or harm the integrity of my local ecosystem.
 - When harvesting perennial seeds from such locations, I follow protocols for **ethical foraging** to ensure I do not inhibit the survival of native plant populations.

➤ **Culturally-Safeguarded Practice During Instability in Places of Origin of Seeds.**

- ☐ I do not use destabilizing events as opportunities to extract or “save” resources to other countries which contributes to further instability through diminished food and seed sovereignty.
- ☐ I support seed keepers to shelter in place and restore local seed systems during natural disasters and/or ongoing conflict, invasion, war, etc.

2) Equitable Benefits Sharing

Practices ☒

➤ **Inclusive View on Profitability Rights.**

- ☐ I acknowledge there is neither a monolithic Indigenous view on patents, nor a reciprocity model universally practiced by Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) communities across the globe.
- ☐ I support models that center cultural and community perspectives and arrangements with equitably-proportionate benefits as defined by the individual TEK communities that directly or indirectly may be impacted by the seed work I would like to do.

➤ **Commitment to Promoting a Diverse Commercial Seed Production System.**

- ☐ I support just and equitable seed economics that avoid unequal power, control, and benefit distribution.
- ☐ I do not patent seeds or participate in patent-adjacent practices such as royalties and contracts offered to exclusive partners in private deals for varieties developed with public funding.
- ☐ I advocate for diverse opportunities for diverse participants and am transparent about the ways I benefit from public and private partnerships.
- ☐ I share benefits in just and fair ways with the individuals and communities that help me acquire, develop, or produce seeds.

3) Respectful Stewardship

Practices ☒

➤ **Marketing/Promotion**

- ☐ I avoid the use of pan-ethnic or incorrect labeling; seed catalog descriptions that have unconfirmed or misleading information regarding

cultural significance or hearsay information or information that represents my imagination or translations to promote seeds as exotic or experimental; and/or marketing false seed stories to increase seed sales.

➤ **Seed Names**

- ☐ I acknowledge that seeds don't have to have names, and in many seed traditions, they are known by/associated with their communities via specific geographic and/or cultural identifiers.
- ☐ When needed for preservation purposes, I utilize culturally and community respectful seed names and practices, including not arbitrarily changing names or changing names in such a way as to remove the ability to trace a seed's origins, or having the effect of erasing its connections to TEK growers or communities.

➤ **Accountability & Evaluation**

- ☐ I can **demonstrate** ongoing implementation and alignment with the practices and statements contained in this pledge to avoid dilution or erasure of culturally meaningful traits, significance, or connection to communities of origin.
- ☐ I **evaluate** my participation in other pledges and/or agreements that may conflict with the change areas contained in the CICS Pledge and do not support contradictory practices.
- ☐ I am **committed** to ongoing evaluation and evolution in my practices to prioritize equity and justice in commercial seed production and community-centered seed work.