

Extraordinary Efforts Involved

It took extraordinary efforts by many players in order to meet the Svalbard Global Seed Vault's opening date. In January 2007, a group of Norwegian architects finalized the structural design. From May to December 2007, a team of workers labored around the clock to build the facility.

The seeds in the Svalbard collection come from a variety of existing crop collections around the world. The largest single source arrived from an international network of crop collections maintained by the Consultative Group on International Agriculture Research (CGIAR); that network sent more than 200,000 crop samples from Asia, Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East—all duplicates of seeds from its 11 crop collections. The CGIAR plans to send shipments until all of its collections are backed up in the seed vault.

Even seed banks in countries experiencing internal turmoil in the last few months made sure their seeds were sent to Svalbard. Two were Pakistan (it sent wheat, rice, and barley, among others) and Kenya (beans, finger millet, and sorghum). "Those two countries not only got seeds here, but they were almost first in line," said Cary Fowler, Executive Director of the Global Crop Diversity Trust. "That underscores the fact that the seed vault is an insurance plan countries need and want."

Shipments from seed banks were flown to Oslo. Trucks then transported the samples to the northern Norwegian port of Tromsø. (One trucker, told of his truck's contents, grew visibly nervous about his responsibility, but he arrived without incident.) Two heavily loaded cargo planes then flew the seeds to Svalbard earlier this month.

"I'm astonished by what the seed banks have done," Fowler said. "Some of the seed banks had their staff working seven days a week for several months. Workers really got into it. And when the people came to pick up the seeds, the workers wanted to be there at the send-off. They held parties. The whole staff would watch the boxes leave and wave goodbye."