

PROFILES IN SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURE

Chiquita Reaps a Better Banana

Since 1992, Chiquita Brands International, the company that invented the banana industry, has been gradually reinventing it, one farm at a time. That transformation has been guided by the Rainforest Alliance and its partners in the Sustainable Agriculture Network (SAN), a coalition of environmental groups in eight tropical nations. Auditors from these groups inspect Chiquita's banana farms annually to ensure that they comply with strict environmental and social standards; farms that meet the requirements are awarded the Rainforest Alliance Certified™ seal.

The certification program was created in response to the environmental problems and poor social conditions that have historically plagued banana farms. Twenty years ago, poor farming practices were a major source of pollution and deforestation on the Caribbean slope of Central America and Colombia. Pesticide-impregnated plastic bags — used to protect bananas while they grow — littered riverbanks near farms, agrochemical runoff killed fish and other aquatic life and sediment choked rivers and coral reefs. Workers often endured long hours and unsafe conditions and suffered health problems as a result of agrochemicals used on the farms.

In order to establish economically viable solutions to these problems, the Rainforest Alliance and its partners in the SAN spent two years visiting farms and conferring with scientists and industry representatives. This effort resulted in the development of nine guiding principles to promote environmental sustainability and social equity on banana farms. The standards include zero tolerance for deforestation, prohibition of pesticides on the so-called “dirty dozen” list, protection of wildlife, conservation of water and soils, better pay, safe and pleasant working conditions and the right of unions to organize.

A Fruitful Evolution

In 1992, Chiquita began applying the SAN's social and economic standards on two of its farms in Costa Rica. These pilot certifications, which took the company two years to achieve, were followed by a systematic transformation of Chiquita's other farms. At significant expense, the company planted buffer zones along streams; protected forest patches; installed systems for filtering wastewater from packing plants; improved garbage management, including the recycling of all plastics; instituted occupational safety programs; improved worker housing, sanitary facilities, storage facilities and other infrastructure; stopped using agrochemicals that pose risks



Chiquita supplies nearly 25 percent of all bananas consumed in North America and Europe.

to workers and aquatic life; and switched to low-toxicity alternatives to fungicides. By 2000, all of Chiquita's company-owned farms in Latin America were Rainforest Alliance Certified. The company then concentrated on helping independent farmers who supply Chiquita with more than one third of its bananas to adopt the same standards. Certification demands steady improvement and criteria are made increasingly strict to take advantage of new technologies and practices, so conditions on certified farms continue to improve every year.

According to Raúl Gómez, a farm manager in Costa Rica who has worked for Chiquita for over 15 years, the implementation of certification standards has been the equivalent of a social revolution. During his time at the company, Gómez has helped prepare several Chiquita farms for certification and has witnessed the program's effectiveness first hand.



OUR MISSION

The Rainforest Alliance works to conserve biodiversity and ensure sustainable livelihoods by transforming land-use practices, business practices and consumer behavior.

www.rainforest-alliance.org

“Chiquita’s adoption of the standards has brought about far-reaching changes,” says Gómez, “not just in our farming practices, but in the minds and attitudes of our people as well.”

Transforming an Industry

Bananas are big business — the world’s number one export fruit and the fourth most important food crop after rice, wheat and maize — and Chiquita is a giant in the industry, supplying nearly 25 percent of the bananas consumed by North Americans and Europeans. Consequently, improvement of the company’s farms has had a tremendously positive impact on vast areas of land and more than 100 communities. The certification of independently owned farms that supply Chiquita with bananas is steadily increasing the acreage and population that benefits from the implementation of SAN standards.

Chiquita protects patches of rainforest, recycles or reuses nearly 80 percent of the plastic bags and twine used on company farms — about 3,000 metric tons per year — and has reforested approximately 2,470 acres (1,000 hectares), planting nearly one million trees and bushes to establish buffer zones along rivers and roadways and around housing and other facilities. The company has also set aside about 2,125 acres (860 hectares) as primary or secondary forest or for natural forest regeneration. Pesticide use is strictly controlled and the workers who apply agrochemicals are required to wear protective gear. The company has planted groundcover on more than half of its farmland, reducing soil erosion and eliminating the need for herbicides. Working conditions are clean and safe, workers have showers, bathrooms and eating areas and their families have access to health care, education and recreational facilities. In addition, Chiquita has worked on community development projects, such as home ownership programs, environmental education workshops and the promotion of small businesses focused on traditional arts and crafts. The company has also installed systems for

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Photos: A. Donà

For more information about the Rainforest Alliance’s sustainable agriculture program, please visit www.rainforest-alliance.org/programs/agriculture



Chiquita has instituted occupational safety programs and provides a safe and clean working environment.

filtering and recycling in its packing plants, reducing water use by 80 percent, and it is investigating biological controls and new fungicide options that could significantly decrease toxicity levels on farms.

Chiquita has demonstrated that environmental and social conditions can be improved without sacrificing production. Rainforest Alliance Certified farms, whether managed by Chiquita or independent producers, are among the most productive farms in the world. Although Chiquita has invested more than \$20 million to make required capital improvements, it has also reduced its production costs by more than \$100 million.

“In addition to improving morale and productivity on our farms, we have saved money in the process. Everybody wins — the workers, the company and the environment, not to mention the Rainforest Alliance, which deserves enormous credit for showing us a better way,” said Manuel Rodríguez, corporate responsibility officer for the Chiquita Fresh Group.

Motivated by its experience with the Rainforest Alliance, Chiquita implemented a company-wide code of conduct and began publishing corporate responsibility reports, which have been widely hailed as straightforward and honest. All of the company’s farms are now certified according to Social Accountability SA8000 criteria, the most rigorous and verifiable social standards currently available. Chiquita also signed an historic labor rights framework agreement with regional and international unions in 2001.

As corporate power grows, so does the importance of corporate responsibility and transparency. The collaboration between the Rainforest Alliance and Chiquita is a stellar example of how a non-profit organization and a corporation can work together in good faith. It demonstrates that a large company can improve the environment and worker conditions while still bettering its bottom line.

