

The Rainforest Alliance Banana Program

A More Sustainable Future for the World's Most Popular Fruit

The Rainforest Alliance is an international non-profit organization working in more than 60 countries at the intersection of business, agriculture and forests. We are building an alliance to create a better future for people and nature by making responsible business the new normal.



Contents

Our History in the Banana Industry	3	The Journey Toward a Sustainable Banana Sector Continues	12
<i>Increasing Demand for Certified Products</i>	4	<i>A New Standard and Assurance System</i>	12
<i>Working Toward More Sustainable Banana Production</i>	4	<i>Data Digitalization to Deepen Impact</i>	12
Our Impact	5	<i>Farmers</i>	12
<i>Increasing Yields and Decreasing Inputs</i>	5	<i>Supply Chain Actors</i>	13
Key Issues Facing the Sector	6	<i>Improved and More Efficient Assurance Through Better Audits</i>	13
<i>The Challenge: People and Nature at Risk of Toxicity</i>	6	<i>Advocacy: A New Approach for the Rainforest Alliance</i>	13
<i>How the Rainforest Alliance Is Taking Action</i>	6	<i>Partnerships for Change</i>	14
<i>Going Further</i>	8	The Next Chapter of the Rainforest Alliance	14
<i>Aerial Application Only Allowed Under Specific Conditions</i>	8		
<i>The Challenge: An Unfair Distribution of the Costs of Sustainable Production</i>	8		
<i>How the Rainforest Alliance Is Taking Action</i>	9		
<i>A Living Wage for Workers on Certified Farms</i>	9		
<i>Going Beyond Certification to Balance the Power in the Supply Chain</i>	10		
<i>The Challenge: Upholding Workers' Rights to Associate</i>	11		
<i>How the Rainforest Alliance Is Taking Action</i>	11		



Jonathan Vega grows bananas and coffee on the Rainforest Alliance Certified™ farm he runs with his brother in Costa Rica.

The Rainforest Alliance has made a significant contribution to a more sustainable banana sector in the last 30 years. This paper describes the Rainforest Alliance banana program and its positive impacts. It also touches on the sustainability issues that the organization needs to continue to address and how it envisions doing this.

Our History in the Banana Industry

Bananas are at the heart of the Rainforest Alliance story. When, in 1989, the Rainforest Alliance began with a three-person office in Costa Rica, we had a front row seat to the vast deforestation that was happening in Central America—due largely to the banana industry.

Historically banana farms in Latin America were at the core of agricultural expansion, driving economic growth and creating thousands of new jobs. But there was little concern for how such growth would impact the local landscape or worker and community health. Plastic bags were routinely tossed into waterways or burned. Workers were often denied the right to organize and wages were low. The use of agrochemicals wreaked havoc on soil, water, and worker health. Forests in Central and South America were cleared to make way for banana plantations.

In the early 1990s, spurred by what he saw, Chris Wille, who designed the first agriculture program for the Rainforest Alliance, called a meeting with banana growers in Costa Rica to share a vision for a more sustainable future for banana

farming.

The results were mixed. Some of those in the meeting felt Wille's ideas were naïve or too expensive to implement. But a few banana growers, including Chiquita and the Ecuadorian company Favorita, saw the potential and business sense of certification and decided to work with the Rainforest Alliance to implement more sustainable practices.

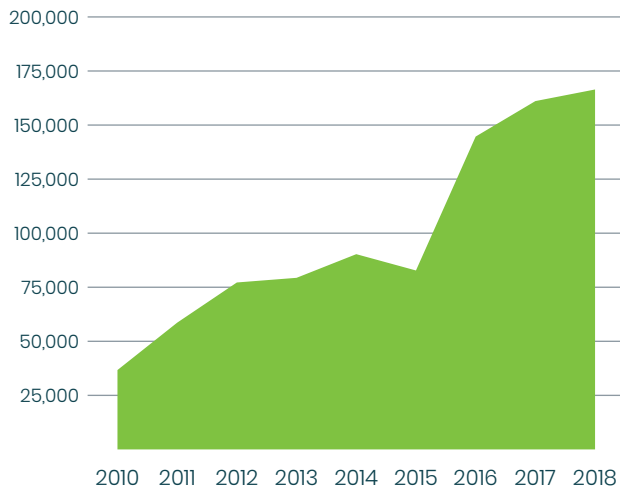
In the first 10 years of implementing the Rainforest Alliance's first agriculture certification standard, Chiquita recorded overall productivity gains of 27 percent and a cost reduction of 12 percent in farms across Central and South America.¹ The Rainforest Alliance banana program had begun. It started providing consumers with the opportunity to buy a more sustainably grown banana and it also paved the way for other sustainability initiatives entering the sector.²

¹ <https://www.rainforest-alliance.org/business/blog/2016/04/20/a-greener-banana/>

² J. Taylor and J. Scharlin. 2004. *Smart Alliance. How a Global Corporation and Environmental Activists Transformed a Tarnished Brand*. Yale University Press.

Figure 1

Rainforest Alliance Certified banana production area, in hectares



The Rainforest Alliance program is the world's largest banana certification program. It certified around 8 million tons of bananas in 2018.

At 24.28 percent of the total, Colombia produces the largest volume of Rainforest Alliance Certified™ bananas. Costa Rica is the second largest at 21.33 percent, followed by Guatemala (15.03 percent), Ecuador (13.89 percent), Honduras (5.92 percent), and the Philippines (4.53 percent).³

At the end of 2018, a total of 2,168 banana growers were included in the Rainforest Alliance Certification. This amounted to more than 200,000 hectares of farms employing a total of 160,000 workers.

Rainforest Alliance Certified bananas are consumed mainly in the EU (85 percent) and the US (15 percent). In the EU, the three biggest markets are Germany, the UK, and the Netherlands.

Increasing Demand for Certified Products

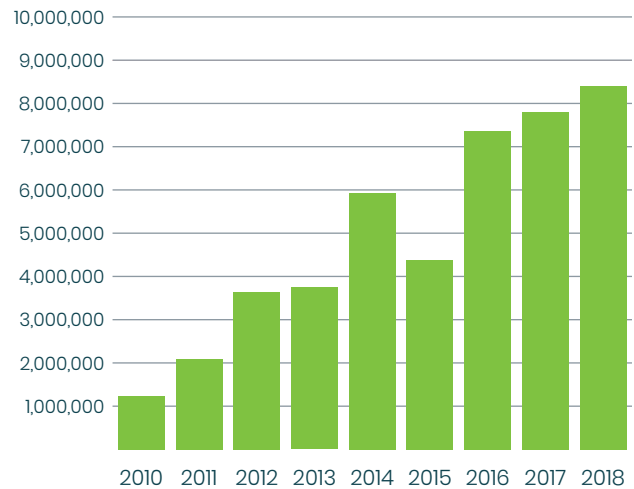
The demand for more sustainably grown and certified bananas from brands and retailers in Europe, the US, and Japan has been key to the success of the Rainforest Alliance banana program. The growth in the certification program also has increased the visibility of the sustainability challenges faced by producers.

Working Toward More Sustainable Banana Production

It has been nearly 30 years since Chris Wille sat down with banana producers in Costa Rica to discuss a more sustainable banana industry. The Rainforest Alliance continues to work with banana growers to help them protect their natural

Figure 2

Rainforest Alliance Certified banana production, in metric tons

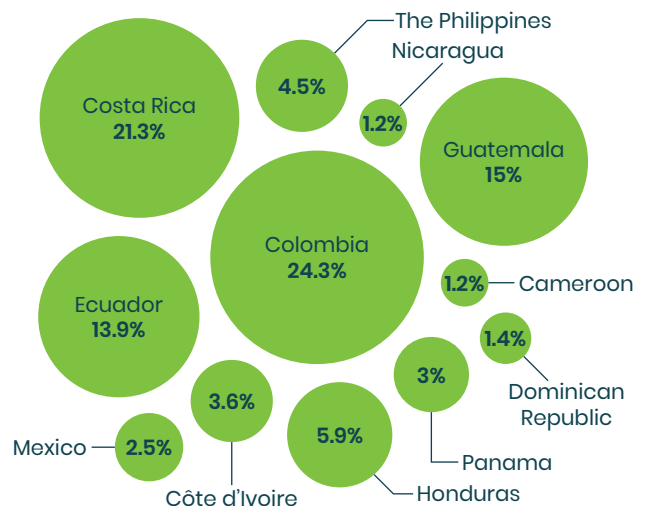


resources and promote the well-being of workers and local communities. Doing this via a voluntary standard allows the organization to provide consumers with the option to buy more sustainably produced bananas.

In order to be Rainforest Alliance Certified, banana plantations need to comply with the Rainforest Alliance Sustainable Agriculture Standard which includes a wide range of good agricultural practices and rigorous social and environmental sustainability criteria, designed to protect workers and their families, and the surrounding environment and communities. There are two types of criteria in the 2017 Standard – critical and continuous improvement criteria. Critical criteria cover the highest-priority and highest-risk environmental, social and labor issues. Farms and group administrators are re-

Figure 3

Rainforest Alliance Certified banana production, by country

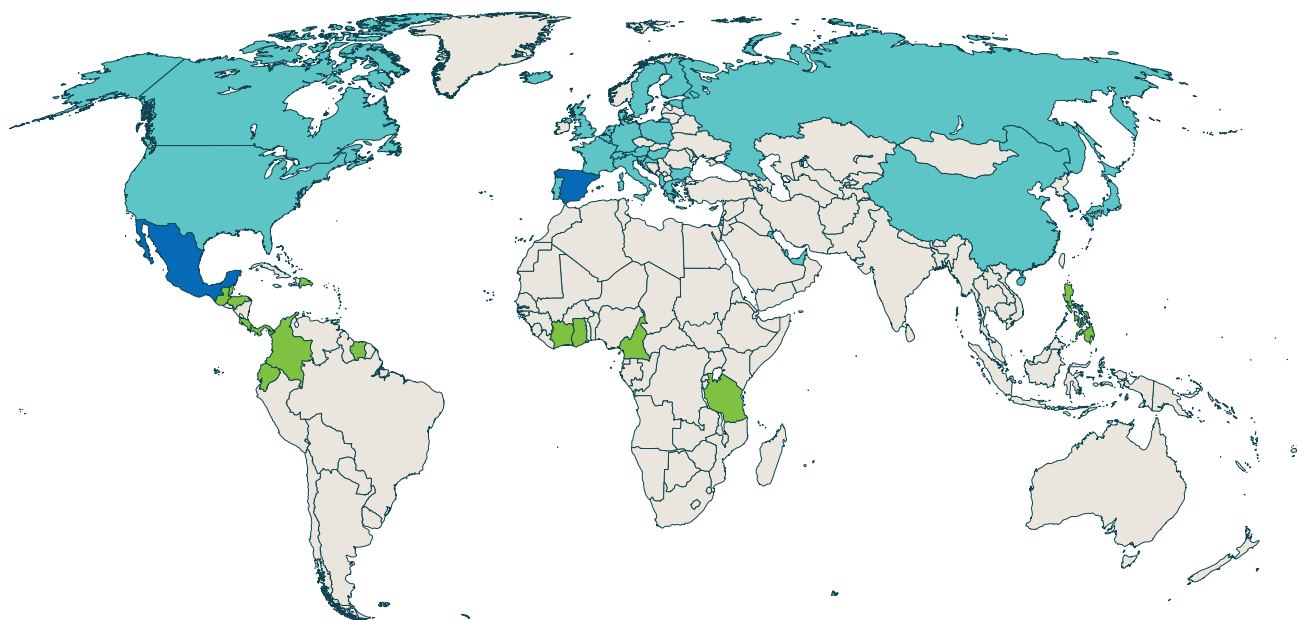


³ These numbers are from April 2019.

Figure 4

Rainforest Alliance Certified banana producing and consuming countries

● producer countries ● consumer countries ● producer and consumer countries



quired to comply with all applicable critical criteria at all time as a condition to grant or maintain the certificate. Continuous improvement criteria require farms to gradually increase their compliance.⁴

Our Impact

In Ecuador, two university researchers compared the performance of 10 Rainforest Alliance Certified banana farms and 14 similarly sized non-certified farms relative to a set of 29 environmental and social best practices. Practice-level performance was then amalgamated to create a “land management index,” a “water quality management index,” an “agrochemical management index” and a “waste management index” for certified and non-certified farms. For each of these indices, Rainforest Alliance Certified farms performed significantly better than the non-certified farms.⁵ The authors also reported differences in implementation for a subset of the 29 practices, although they did not report the statistical significance of these differences. For all practices for which data were reported, the certified farms performed better than non-certified. These practices included: creating buffer zones or vegetative barriers, treating banana processing wastewater before release, avoiding use of the herbicide paraquat, training on pest management for farm workers, and dispos-

ing of plastic bags properly.

Increasing Yields and Decreasing Inputs

The Rainforest Alliance provides banana farms with the tools to cultivate their crops more efficiently. By conserving water, composting, and decreasing use of agrochemicals, farm owners not only safeguard the health of their land, they save money. By improving their farming practices, they can also increase their yield. The same Ecuadorian impact study found that yields on certified banana farms were higher than on

Sidebar

Global Banana Production

In 2018, an estimated 19.2 million tons of bananas were exported. The world's leading exporter is Ecuador, with 6.6 million tons in 2018, followed by the Philippines, Costa Rica, Guatemala and Colombia.

The largest importers of bananas are the EU (6 million tons) and the US (4.2 million tons). The EU gets its bananas mainly from Ecuador, Costa Rica, and Colombia, with each providing about 20 percent of the imports. The US imports its bananas primarily from Ecuador (37 percent) and Guatemala (20 percent).*

4 Rainforest Alliance. (2020). *Farm Certification*. <https://www.rainforest-alliance.org/business/solutions/certification/agriculture/how-certification-works/farm-certification/>

5 Melo C.J, Wolf S. (2007). Ecocertification of Ecuadorian bananas: Prospects for progressive north-south linkages. *Studies in Comparative International Development* 42: 256–278.

* FAO. (2019). *Banana Market Review 2018*. <http://www.fao.org/3/ca5626en/CA5626EN.PDF>



A sign on a Rainforest Alliance Certified banana farm marks the boundary of permitted agrochemical application.

non-certified farms, at 39.9 versus 32.7 metric tons per hectare per year.⁶

Key Issues Facing the Sector

Although we have seen improvements in the banana sector as a whole and on certified farms in particular, there are still several serious sustainability issues on banana farms.

The Challenge: People and Nature at Risk of Toxicity

Banana producers face a number of threats to the survival and profitability of their plantations: their crops are affected by problems such as fruit-eating insects, tree diseases, air-borne fungi like black sigatoka⁷, and by the soil-borne fungus *Fusarium tropical race four* (TR4).⁸ Black sigatoka can grow and destroy an entire plantation in a matter of days.⁹ TR4 has infested plantations globally, in South-East Asia, Pakistan, Australia, and elsewhere. The fungus can remain in the soil for more than 30 years, and cannot be eliminated from the ground by any chemical treatment.¹⁰ Banana trees are particularly susceptible to these infestations for several reasons. They are grown in a warm and humid climate that is favorable for spreading pests. In addition, bananas are grown on large dense mono-culture plantations on which pests have

few natural enemies, and it is a perennial crop that is grown without crop rotation.

As a result, banana plantations rely heavily on the use of pesticides, some of which need to be applied via air. An advantage of aerial application over manual spraying is that workers do not need to touch the chemicals directly. However, because of the spreading of fumes it is still associated with problems for the health of workers, communities, waterways, and wildlife.

Farm workers are at risk of toxicity due to pesticides, especially if they aren't provided with adequate safety training and protective equipment. Depending on the degree of exposure, they may suffer from symptoms such as headaches, skin rashes, and blurred vision; in the longer term, there is an increased risk of cancer, amongst other diseases.¹¹ Beyond the farm we also see a high risk of pesticide exposure in the surrounding communities: People who live close to the farms can experience pesticide related problems due to pesticide waste being dumped nearby, wind drafts from aerial spraying, or infiltration of pesticides in their drinking water.¹² Finally, wildlife is also compromised when surrounding rivers become contaminated, as fish with high toxicity levels are then eaten by animals, and negative impacts extend throughout the food chain.¹⁴

How the Rainforest Alliance Is Taking Action

Since the start of the banana program 30 years ago, the Rainforest Alliance has worked on limiting the exposure of workers, surrounding communities, and nature to harmful pesticides. The Rainforest Alliance Sustainable Agriculture Standard has always included strict safety requirements for workers when applying pesticides and has limited the use of hazardous pesticides.

The Standard's pesticide management requirements are based on a strong integrated pest management approach (IPM). This approach highlights the importance of preventing and monitoring pests. And it encourages natural and manual pest control mechanisms such as the manual removal of infected leaves, drainage control to prevent excessive soil moisture and the use of preventive applications like mineral oils. Following an IPM plan also means that a preference is given to low-toxicity pesticides, and that pesticides are applied only to the parts of the crop affected by pests. In addition to requiring IPM, the Standard requires limiting the use of pesticides.

6 Idem 9

7 NPR, Global Love Of Bananas May Be Hurting Costa Rica's Crocodiles, 2013. <https://www.npr.org/sections/thesalt/2013/09/24/225793450/global-love-of-bananas-may-be-hurting-costa-ricas-crocodiles?t=1554795269095>

8 FAO. (2020). *Fusarium Tropical Race 4 (TR4)*. <http://www.fao.org/world-banana-forum/fusariumtr4/en/>

9 Idem 7

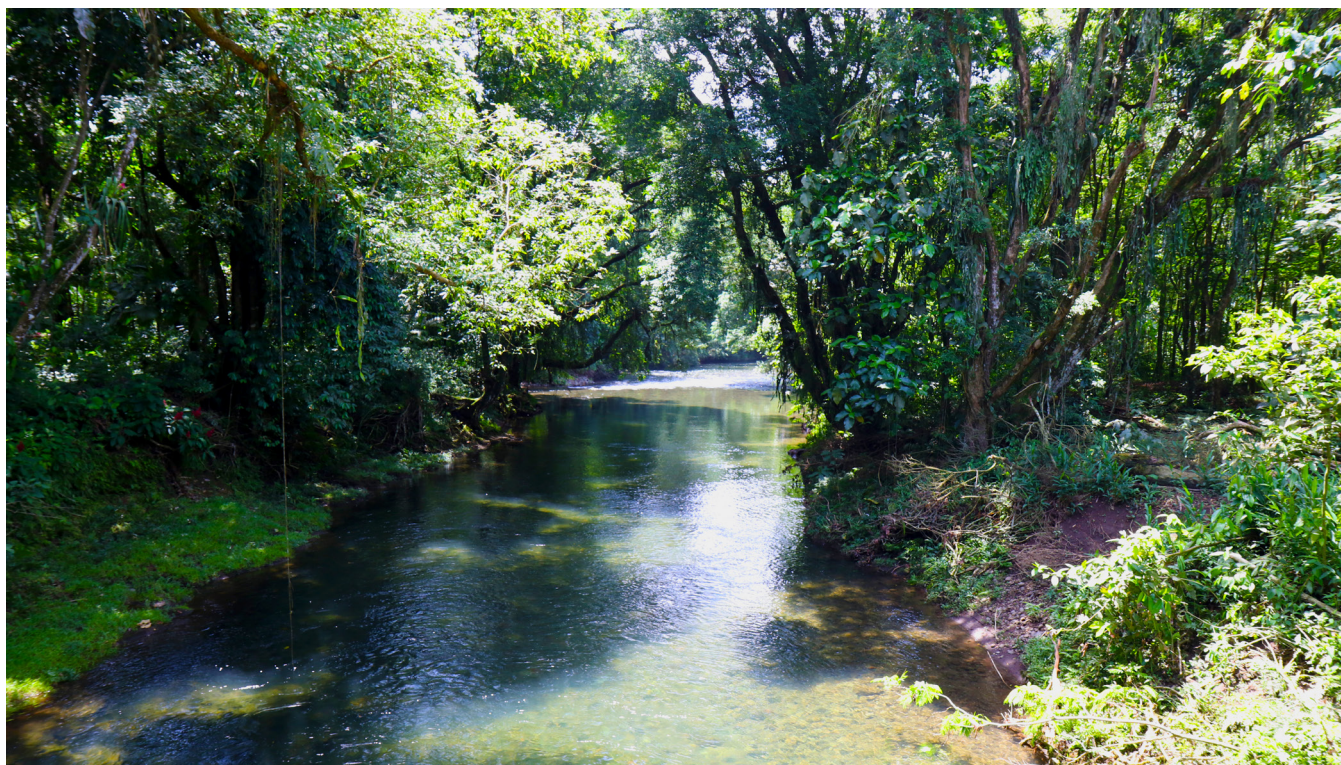
10 Idem 8

11 Cesare, S. 2018 Anticipating the effects of pesticides on farmworkers health based on real practices: the case of banana plantation. Chieti: Université Montpellier; Università degli studi G.D'Annunzio <https://tel.archives-ouvertes.fr/tel-01869841/document>

12 Wesseling, C., Ahlbom, A., Antich, D., Rodriguez, A.C., Castro, R., 1996. Cancer in banana plantation workers in Costa Rica. *Int. J. Epidemiol.* 25, 1125–1131. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ije/25.6.1125>

13 Wilson, J. S., Otsuki, T. 2004 To spray or not to spray: pesticides, banana exports, and food safety, *Food Policy*, Volume 29, Issue 2, April 2004, Pages 131–146. <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/745c/lb-9c756e16788064e3c3fae09bd3f27185dc.pdf>

14 Idem 7



Maintaining tree cover along rivers and streams reduces the need for pesticides by providing habitat for natural enemies of pests and creating a more favorable microclimate on the farm.

During the development of the 2017 Sustainable Agriculture Standard, the Rainforest Alliance consulted with diverse stakeholders, including scientists, academics, and producers across the globe, who gave input on the feasibility of eliminating hazardous agrochemicals on banana farms in the short term. As a result, the 2017 standard prohibits the use of 152 pesticides covered by the WHO/FAO framework of Highly Hazardous Pesticides. A few of these chemicals are exempted from this ban in banana production (and other crops) until June 2020 under strict conditions.¹⁵ The 2017 standard includes specific risk-management requirements for an additional set of 166 active ingredients. As a result, 318 pesticide active ingredients are regulated in the 2017 Sustainable Agriculture standard.¹⁶

Another important measure to decrease the negative impacts of pesticide use is the diversification of the farm's ecosystem. The Agriculture Standard requires 10 percent of the area to have tree cover, especially along river ways, and protect all types of natural ecosystems. These practices have a positive influence on the implementation of IPM, because these natural ecosystems can host natural enemies of pests and they also create a more favorable microclimate. To achieve this, there is a continuous improvement system

that defines progression of sustainability performance. An independent study by Wageningen University on the impact of Rainforest Alliance certification on the social, economic, and environmental conditions on small banana farms in Colombia showed that Rainforest Alliance Certified farms were more likely to have buffer zones on river banks than non-certified farms (92 percent versus 44 percent), although this result is not significant in regression analysis.¹⁷

The Rainforest Alliance also has extensive requirements on the safe application of pesticides. They include personal protective equipment, shower stations, a facility for workers to wash their personal protective equipment, regular medical exams, trainings for workers, and limited-use scenarios.¹⁸ The Wageningen study showed that workers on Rainforest Alliance Certified farms more often wear a complete set of Personal Protective Equipment.¹⁹

¹⁵ Rainforest Alliance. Exceptional Use of FAO/WHO highly hazardous pesticides. Version 2.2. 2017. https://www.rainforest-alliance.org/business/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/01_exceptional-use_en-1.pdf

¹⁶ Rainforest Alliance. 2017. Lists of Pesticides Management. https://www.rainforest-alliance.org/business/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/02_lists-pesticides-management_en.pdf

¹⁷ Beekman, T. Dekkers, M. Kusters, G. 2019. Toward a sustainable banana supply chain in Colombia : Rainforest Alliance Certification and economic, social and environment conditions on small-scale banana plantations in Magdalena, Colombia. Wageningen : Wageningen Economic Research (Wageningen Economic Research report 2019-019) – ISBN 9789463435581 – 48. <https://doi.org/10.18174/466678>

¹⁸ Rainforest Alliance, 2017. The Rainforest Alliance Sustainable Agriculture Standard. Critical Criterias 4.14, 4.15, 4.16, 4.17 which include the criteria on the use of PPE. https://www.rainforest-alliance.org/business/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/03_rainforest-alliance-sustainable-agriculture-standard_en.pdf

¹⁹ Idem 13

Going Further

To make sure pesticide use is not only decreasing on certified farms, but in the whole sector and in all countries, governments need to support farm owners in this transition by facilitating the availability and registration of new molecules and banning the use of hazardous pesticides. In our new strategy the Rainforest Alliance will be working with banana-sector stakeholders to bring this need to the attention of governments and to implement new policies.

Aerial Application Only Allowed Under Specific Conditions

The Rainforest Alliance is also reducing the negative environmental and health impact of aerial application. Aerial application is only allowed when the farm complies with a list of health and safety criteria.²⁰ For example, it is not permitted to conduct aerial application with pesticides when workers are present on the farms, and after the spraying of pesticides which have inhalation risks the farmer needs to apply a Restricted Entry Interval in which workers only access the farm with protective equipment. Spray drift to natural ecosystems and human activity is reduced through non-application zones or vegetative barriers around the farms. Non-application zones are also required when there are waterways inside the farms, and aerial application is only allowed when wind speeds are less than 10km/h.

Aerial application is still allowed since it is an economically viable and effective method in controlling black sigatoka and other pests. When employed with all the rules listed above, aerial application is permitted to prevent the establishment or spread of fungal diseases, which have the power to destroy an entire farm's worth of banana plants.

The Wageningen Study found that plantation managers at Rainforest Alliance Certified plantations have more knowledge about restrictions related to aerial application. Neighboring communities are notified about pest control through meetings and loudspeaker warnings more often than at non-certified plantations. Workers and managers at Rainforest Alliance Certified plantations know more about Restricted Entry Interval policies, and it was found that the time interval for entry after pesticide application is longer on certified farms. Also, administrators on Rainforest Alliance Certified plantations report more instances of areas where aerial application is restricted, like houses, public roads and aquatic ecosystems.²¹

The Challenge: An Unfair Distribution of the Costs of Sustainable Production

Underlying many of the issues faced at farm level is the serious structural issue of unfair distribution of value in the banana supply chain. Farm owners receive low prices for their



A worker packs bananas at Platanera Río Sixaola in Costa Rica. Most of the farm's output is exported to Germany.

bananas, leaving them with little money with which to run their farms, let alone invest in sustainable practices, make long term investments, or pay workers a decent wage.

Most value in the banana supply chain is captured by importers and retailers. EU retailers now capture some 36–43 percent of the consumer-end price, by far the largest share of all supply chain actors.²² Their combined market power means they are able to have significant impact on the price producers can achieve for their bananas.

Import prices over the past 30 years have been declining and have now stagnated in most key markets. They have been under pressure due to European retail price wars, especially in Germany and the UK.²³ In most European countries consumer prices stagnated or slightly increased in the last 15 years, despite inflation. Between 2000 and 2014, UK consumer prices even dropped 50 percent due to retail price wars.²⁴

As a result, the value retained in producing countries has fallen some 20–50 percent.²⁵ Moreover, workers on banana plantations in the last 15 years only earned between five percent and nine percent of EU consumer-end prices, the smallest share besides exporters.²⁶ Production costs, however, have risen in the last 15 years; costs of shipping jumped an estimated 233 percent, inputs like pesticides have increased on

22 BASIC, 2015. Banana value chains in Europe and the consequences of Unfair Trading Practices. http://www.makefruitfair.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/banana_value_chain_research_FINAL_WEB.pdf

23 BASIC, 2014. Analysis of German banana value chains and impacts on small farmers & workers. https://lebasic.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/BASIC_German-Banana-Value-Chain-Study_Final.pdf

24 BASIC, 2015. Banana value chains in the United Kingdom and the consequences of Unfair Trading Practices. http://www.makefruitfair.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/banana_value_chains_UK_FINAL_WEB.pdf

25 Idem 13

26 Idem 13

20 Rainforest Alliance, 2017. Policy on Aerial Fumigation. https://www.rainforest-alliance.org/business/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/79_Policy_on_Aerial_Fumigation_en-1.pdf

21 Idem 13

average 195 percent and packaging costs have risen an estimated 150 percent.²⁷ In that same period the costs of a decent standard of living has also risen in all production countries, e.g. by 92 percent in Colombia, 129 percent in Ecuador, and 218 percent in Costa Rica.²⁸

The power imbalances and seasonality in a low-price environment also promotes unfair trading practices. BASIC identified a range of unfair trading practices in the banana supply chain.²⁹ Examples are: some retailers not signing contracts with suppliers; changing or cancelling orders at short notice, unjustified quality claims, and 60-day payment periods. The costs of these practices are transferred to the producers or exporters who already carry the highest risk in the chain.

The low import prices are insufficient to cover rising production costs and the rising costs of living in production countries. This means farmers are increasingly struggling to invest in measures that would improve the sustainability of their farms, such as conserving the environment and paying workers a decent wage. If we are to see a flourishing and sustainable banana industry then the extreme imbalance in value distribution must be urgently addressed so that producers are able to invest in sustainable production practices.

How the Rainforest Alliance Is Taking Action

Currently the Rainforest Alliance's most significant intervention is its certification system. We realize, however, that the causes of the structural imbalance in the banana supply chain and the accompanying low prices are far beyond the reach of the farm or even the certified supply chain. Entrenched economic realities and trade structures in the ba-

27 CIRAD, November 2012. "Coûts intermédiaires de la filière banane d'importation en Europe : Répartition et évolution".

28 Economic Commission for Latin America (ECLA) and International Monetary Fund (IMF).

29 Idem 21, 22, and 23



The Rainforest Alliance Certified seal is the consumer-facing marker of bananas grown to Rainforest Alliance certification standards.

nana sector impose significant barriers to increasing the price farm owners get paid for their bananas and hence covering the cost of sustainable production. A certification system cannot solve the structural imbalances in the supply chain. At the same time, there is an urgent need to address these structural imbalances in order to unlock sustainability gains in the sector. To this end, as part of its new organizational strategy, the Rainforest Alliance will leverage other tools in addition to certification to drive greater economic incentives to certified producers, allowing them to recover the costs and investments associated with sustainable production.

A Living Wage for Workers on Certified Farms

The Rainforest Alliance certification system has long provided a recognized mechanism to help protect workers' rights, meet basic needs, and provide fair and safe working conditions. The Sustainable Agriculture Standard, for example, requires payment of the legal minimum wage as well as demonstrated progress toward payment of a living wage. It does so pragmatically by asking for several core criteria to be in place to receive certification and then requiring further improvements on an annual basis. This progress is based on a plan that Rainforest Alliance Certified farms must have to work towards providing a living wage for their workers.

The Rainforest Alliance is co-founder and active participant of the Global Living Wage Coalition (GLWC). This is a coalition of standards systems and living wage experts that works with partner networks to establish living wage benchmarks in key countries using a consistent, objective, and agreed-upon approach (the Anker Methodology). These wage benchmarks serve as a common guidepost for all the member standards systems and certification schemes, as well as participating farms, farm workers, and companies.³⁰

A living wage benchmark study conducted in Costa Rica and Belize in 2018 by the Rainforest Alliance and independent researchers, supported by the Sustainable Initiative Fruit and Vegetables (SIFAV)³¹, showed that among participating farms, when salaries are prorated, most wages range from the minimum wage to about 40 percent above the minimum wage. In Costa Rica the minimum wage of \$467 a month, however, is significantly lower than the living wage of \$741 USD as calculated by the benchmark study. The researchers found that while most job types fall below the living wage, some job types with large numbers of workers at certain farms are paying at, or even above, a living wage. In Belize the living wage benchmark is yet to be determined, but most farms report wages from 120 percent to 160 percent above minimum wage.

The study conducted by the University of Wageningen on the impact of Rainforest Alliance certification on banana farms in Colombia found that workers on certified plantations had

30 Living wages are calculated based on an exhaustive methodology created by the Global Living Wage Coalition. <https://www.globallivingwage.org/about/>

31 Voorend, Anker, Anker. 2017. Living Wage report rural Costa Rica. <https://www.globallivingwage.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/LW-CR-Benchmark-Report-Final-.pdf>



Eriberto Ruiz harvests bananas at Finca Santa Marta in Costa Rica.

higher hourly wages and more monetary benefits than on non-certified plantations. However, their in-kind benefits were equal and most workers on all plantations reported that their wage was still insufficient for their daily needs.³²

For farmers to be able to pay their workers a higher wage, they will need to get a better price for their certified bananas. To this end the new 2020 Rainforest Alliance Standard that is under development, will include the payment of a mandatory sustainability differential to certified farmers. The sustainability differential is proposed to recognize the effort and investments made by producers to implement more sustainable practices.

Going Beyond Certification to Balance the Power in the Supply Chain

To be able to expand its impact in changing the structural imbalances in the supply chain beyond the farm, the Rainforest Alliance is developing new intervention strategies in addition to its certification program. These include focused advocacy efforts within the industry and with governments as well as tailored interventions with market actors willing and ready to make those additional investments in their supply chains. Enabling covering the cost of sustainable production, includ-

ing improved wages, requires the engagement of all relevant public and private actors in the sector and looking at a combination of interventions and enabling policies. All buyers, traders, and retailers need to contribute to increasing the price paid. If only a few retailers support improvements such as paying workers a living wage, the plantation's owners are left with the legal obligations toward workers if those retailers were to stop sourcing from these farms, resulting in potentially long-term negative impact both on the farm's operations as well as on a stable work environment for workers.

Governments will need to implement enabling policies for a fairer distribution of value. For example, all national governments will need to set a minimum wage that is at least on the living wage level, and then implement this minimum wage, as has been done by the government of Ecuador. This way, farm owners will need to pay their workers a living wage and retailers will have to increase the price paid for bananas. Another positive Ecuadorian law is the minimum price they set for a box of bananas, based on what producers need to receive. Though enforcement still needs to improve to make buyers respect it, the law sets a good example for other governments to contribute to fair value distribution.

To be able to get all stakeholders aligned and contributing to a fair cost distribution it is necessary to first look at the cost of sustainable production and the current distribution of these costs. After that, enablers need to be identified within

32 Idem 13

the supply chain and local policy environment to support, incentivize, or enforce a better distribution of costs. To do this the Rainforest Alliance is looking at tools and approaches to measure and monitor the cost of sustainable production and living income gaps. The organization is also a member of the World Banana Forum which is also looking into these issues. This will establish a solid base for market recognition of practices such as climate change mitigation, pesticide reduction, and better livelihoods, including payment of a living wage. For instance, the Rainforest Alliance together with IDH developed a self-assessment tool for identifying the living wage gap at farm level. The tool, which takes the form of a matrix, was created considering the specific needs of banana plantations, and developed with the vision of facilitating and stimulating dialogue within and beyond the banana sector on the payment of a living wage. It is a practical tool that allows plantations to effectively assess what they are paying their workers against the applicable living wage figures and it helps companies to assess the risk in their supply chain and the living wage gap that needs to be closed.³³

The Challenge: Upholding Workers' Rights to Associate

Alongside the challenges of extensive pesticide use and low prices, worker rights violations still occur in banana production. While many plantations have their own worker-representative organizations, which often work well, we still find

instances in which workers are unable to associate with worker organizations of their choice. Without an option to independently associate, workers have limited opportunities to advocate for themselves in order to solve the issues that affect them, such as the discrimination against migrants, and perpetuation of informal or repeated short-term contracts that prevent workers from benefiting from national labor laws (given that these only protect permanent workers). Needless to say, the degree of freedom of association is the result of several context and culture-specific factors that are deeply embedded in each producing country's social fabric.

How the Rainforest Alliance Is Taking Action

The Rainforest Alliance recognizes the importance of unions and other types of workers associations. The 2017 Sustainable Agriculture Standard requires farm owners to uphold workers' rights to associate, organize, and collectively bargain, and ensure access to grievance mechanisms that allow objections to be made and reviewed without fear of reprisal by management.

In the spring of 2017, the Rainforest Alliance certification program launched a policy to improve auditing of the Standard's requirements related to workers' right to freely associate with organizations of their choice. This policy is applicable when complaints related to freedom of association have been raised about a farm. A requirement to meet with organization representatives before the formal audit starts is part of the

³³ <https://www.idhsustainabletrade.com/news/matrix-living-wage/>



A worker prepares banana bunches for shipment at Platanera Río Sixaola, a Certified banana farm in Costa Rica.



Rafael Rivas is a member of the Workers' Committee at Platanera Río Sixaola.

policy.³⁴ This policy brings valuable information to light, which is then cross-referenced with other data collected during the farm audits. This process has helped to substantiate vital information that eventually led to several farms not achieving certification because they failed to meet freedom of association criteria.

The Rainforest Alliance engages continually with labor unions in producing countries, as well as with the local banana sector representatives. The organization aims to strengthen worker representation through organizations of workers' choice. Worker organizations and other stakeholders are encouraged to inform the Rainforest Alliance when they have information on the violation of workers' rights on certified farms. The Rainforest Alliance's 30-year journey in this sector and presence in these countries helps tremendously in gaining an understanding of the local nuances and challenges posed to worker representation on these farms. We have continued to evolve our strategies and approaches towards addressing these.

The Journey Toward a Sustainable Banana Sector Continues

The Rainforest Alliance has made important steps towards its vision of a sustainable banana sector with its certification program, the development of a common and credible protocol for living wage benchmarking and monitoring, and through collaboration with producers and commodity buyers to implement the living wage concept through practical and time-bound road maps for action. However, there is still a long way to go before this task will be fully accomplished. The organization will continue working towards it and will raise the bar with its standard and supporting programs. The merger between the Rainforest Alliance and UTZ has provided the organization with a lot of opportunities to increase the impact of its certification program.

A New Standard and Assurance System

The Rainforest Alliance is developing a new Standard and Assurance system that will replace both the old Rainforest Alliance Sustainable Agriculture Standard and the UTZ standard. A draft of the new standard has gone through an extensive public consultation process and will be published in June 2020. It will be rolled out during 2020 and 2021 and mandatory for producers from the middle of 2021.

The new Rainforest Alliance system will continuously evolve based on new insights from data and innovation. Alongside the core requirements of the certification program, the program will make space to learn from best practices across the sectors and landscapes, constantly innovating and testing new approaches. And when they work, the Rainforest Alliance will feed them back into the certification system—creating

new guidelines or training materials, scaling up good practices, or changing the requirements of the program.

Data Digitalization to Deepen Impact

The Rainforest Alliance' new system will harness the power of data by developing and implementing new data collection and analyses techniques to derive insights into current practices. Examples of new tools are: linkage with trader data systems, digital solutions for Internal Management Systems for producer-led groups, and storing and managing of Geographic Information System data.

The new data strategy will support the certification system and help ensure the quality and credibility of data coming from the system. It will allow the Rainforest Alliance to make its certification program more focused on risks, and to identify areas where there are particular sustainability challenges. In these areas, we will be able to target additional investment—from our own resources, from donors, and from supply chain partners—into landscape and community projects that deepen impact.

Farmers

Through the new databases farmers will get access to satellite data and data that will allow peer comparison. This will support farmers to improve their practices. The data system will recognize improvements made by farmers and can adapt to different contexts, better equipping farmers to take steps on their sustainability journey and determining their own path. Farmers will also get access to digital tools that help them improve the efficiency of the farming system, as data on cost and input use will highlight inefficiencies and



Satellite imagery gives farmers a birds-eye view of their farms, allowing them to improve practices.

34 Rainforest Alliance, 2018. Rules for planning and conducting audits. Section 6.7 and 6.71. https://www.rainforest-alliance.org/business/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/85_rules-planning-conducting-audits_en.pdf



An auditor visits a worker's house on the San Alberto banana farm in Costa Rica.

support the decision process for more precise applications, potentially reducing pesticide use and related costs. This will help their business and reduce the administrative burden of certification. The Rainforest Alliance will also explore how, with the new data system, economic value can be better transferred from consumers and companies to farmers.

Supply Chain Actors

The new certification program's approach to data aims to extend traceability all the way to farms. This will give companies valuable insights into their supply base and enable them to make more effective investments in sustainability. Our focus in the short term will be on capturing insights through improved data visualization and reporting techniques and driving more focused and impactful investments by supply chain actors at origin. By creating greater supply-chain transparency, we aim to make it possible to make results- or impact-based claims. With these new measures we aim to build supply chain accountability and incentivize the right supply chain behaviors that can enable and drive sustainability impact at origin.

Improved and More Efficient Assurance Through Better Audits

Besides the digitalization of data, the new assurance system will also improve the quality of audits. The auditors will focus on issues that are assessed as high risk in a particular region.

These high-risk issues will be identified by the Rainforest Alliance and shared with the Certification Bodies (CBs) and their auditors. The auditors will receive extra training on the high-risk issues and how to detect them during an audit. The CBs will also incorporate local experts (for example, lawyers or experts in social criteria or agrochemical use) on the high-risk issues as part of the audit team.

One high-risk issue in some regions (while not at all in others), is the violation of the right to freedom of association. In the new system the auditors in the areas where violation of this right is widespread will be better trained and more focused on detecting it.

Auditing will also improve, because more unannounced audits will be planned. And audits may be planned during aerial application days or during high-production season, so not only permanent workers can be interviewed, but also temporary (seasonal) ones.

And last, the Rainforest Alliance is developing tools that will increase access to information that has been verified during audits with the purpose of checking the audits quality. For example, auditors will be required to upload photographic evidence of compliance with critical criteria, community interviews records, and records of the visits to all farm areas.

Advocacy: A New Approach for the Rainforest Alliance

The Rainforest Alliance recognizes that its impacts need to

reach beyond the farm level to be able to address the structural imbalances in the banana supply chain. To this end, as part of its new organizational strategy, the Rainforest Alliance intends to leverage other tools in addition to certification to drive greater economic incentives to certified producers, allowing them to recover the costs and investments associated with sustainable production. These include focused advocacy efforts within the industry in order to build greater transparency on the gap between producer costs and income, and the bridging of this gap. The organization will also advocate for specific regulatory and policy frameworks that help address issues like freedom of association and the reduction of the use of hazardous pesticides.

Partnerships for Change

We want to work with supply chain players, private or public, who are sincerely committed to tackle the aforementioned problems in the sector. Together with them, we want to develop and conduct interventions that will bring us closer to our goal. There are currently two of those partnerships starting for the banana sector.

One is with the Walmart Foundation, which finances a project implemented by the Rainforest Alliance that aims to promote environmental and social best practices in the banana value chain in key sourcing areas in Guatemala and Ecuador. Based on an assessment by the Rainforest Alliance of small and medium banana farms in the two countries, the key priorities for action are:

- Improving farm and community management to enhance productivity and improve livelihoods with a focus on vulnerable groups;
- Reducing agrochemical use by increasing the adoption of integrated pest management practices to minimize environmental and human risks;
- Increasing climate resilience through improved biodiversity conservation and climate smart agriculture practices.

The project aims to train more than 8,000 farm owners and farm workers on best practices, improve the business skills and/or access to finance of 1,400 women, and impact 24,000 people in total.

Another important partnership, as previously mentioned, is the living wage benchmark study in Costa Rica and Belize that the Rainforest Alliance is conducting with IDH. IDH and the Rainforest Alliance will continue the partnership to refine, test, and adapt the developed salary matrix through a process of wider consultation with the GLWC, relevant sustainability standard organizations, and private companies. Goals of the continued partnerships are to make the salary matrix a widely recognized self-assessment tool that can be used by the wider network of social sustainability standards when calculating gaps with the applicable living wages; to develop an assurance system guidance that enables a harmonized approach on how the data gathered through the tool can be verified during a third-party audit; and making the salary matrix and the assurance system applicable to more sectors than agriculture alone. Several companies have al-



Banana bunches await packing at a Rainforest Alliance Certified farm in Costa Rica.

ready shown interest in using the tool, and a group of Dutch retailers, signatories of the IMVO Food Covenant, a voluntary agreement that aims to improve sustainability in food supply chains, have agreed to test the tool to bring transparency to their banana supply chains.

The Next Chapter of the Rainforest Alliance

This is a unique moment in time for the Rainforest Alliance. As an organization with a 30-year history of partnering with farmers, conservation organizations, scientists, and businesses around the globe, the Rainforest Alliance entered into its most significant partnership yet in early 2018, merging with sustainability certification organization UTZ. The merger has created a stronger organization (called the Rainforest Alliance) that is better able to support farmers, businesses, and consumers on the path to sustainability. It can use its larger scale and collective might to drive innovation and change in its sectors of operations. For the banana program, this means a stronger, evidence-based certification system, stronger market partnerships, a bold advocacy approach, and innovative tailored cooperation with private supply chain players to address systemic barriers. As the Rainforest Alliance moves into a new chapter of its history, the organization retains its farmer-centric orientation while simultaneously embarking on new partnerships and collaborations to scale the reach and impact of its approach to sustainability. 🌱



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