

Guatemalan Farmer Waits to Meet Bush

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CHIRIJUYU, Guatemala -- Mariano Canu can't stop smiling as he looks out on his lettuce crop. With the help of U.S. government aid, he exports vegetables across Central America and is no longer struggling just to get by.

His children are in school and he heads an association of 66 farming families that supply romaine lettuce, beets, broccoli and other vegetables to Wal-Mart's Central American stores.

And on Monday, President Bush will be dropping by to see his operation.

In a speech this week in Washington, Bush singled out Canu as example of how U.S.-backed trade can help better the lives of Latin America's poor, a major theme of his weeklong tour that also will take him to [Brazil](#), Uruguay, Colombia and [Mexico](#).

"People like Mariano are showing what the people of this region can accomplish when given a chance," Bush said. "By helping our neighbors build strong and vibrant economies, we increase the standard of living for all of us."

Canu, in turn, said he expects to ask Bush to open up the U.S. market to the producers in Chimaltenango, a province where the majority are Kaqchiquel Mayas and endured tremendous hardships during Guatemala's brutal 1960-1996 civil war.

"Let Mr. Bush come so he can see what we produce, that we have the capacity ... so that if they order half a million heads of lettuce a week, we can deliver half a million," Canu told The Associated Press on Wednesday.

Canu's association, Labradores Mayas, produces 95,000 heads of lettuce a week that are sold in Guatemala, Costa Rica, [El Salvador](#) and Honduras. The group is also one of the major vegetable suppliers for Wal-Mart Stores Inc.'s Central American supermarkets.

Canu, 55, recalls how when he was a boy he traveled with his parents to Guatemala's Pacific coast to work as a day laborer on sugar cane plantations.

"I was very little but I remember we had to cross a river, hung from a cable, to reach the plantation," he said. "Now I don't have to do that. We live better. Food, clothes, my kids' education, it's all better."

In Tecpan, the town where Canu lives, seven out of every 10 residents are poor _ living on less than \$2 a day _ and 18 percent live on less than a \$1 a day, according to Guatemalan government statistics.

Nearly three-quarters of Guatemala's indigenous people live in poverty. The vast majority of peasant farmers cannot support their families with their corn and bean crops and must supplement their earnings as laborers on the country's sugar and coffee plantations.

"We still plant corn for our use and to rotate crops, because the land, like any living thing, needs to rest," Canu said. "But you can't get by on corn alone."

A Guatemalan farmer can earn 10 times more planting vegetables for export than what he would get for corn, said Tulio Garcia, director of the Guatemalan Exporters Association.

But to efficiently produce the high-value crops, growers must first learn the requirements of each crop, then have access to capital, irrigation and good roads.

Starting with a \$20,000 loan in 1986 to help build an irrigation system, U.S. assistance to producers in Chirijuyu has included advice on things ranging from international produce sanitization standards to marketing and good business practices.

Since 2003, Labradores Maya has received \$325,000 in technical assistance from a U.S. program that aids agriculture exporters.

The United States Agency for International Development, or USAID, has earmarked \$100 million for crop diversification in Guatemala over the past 20 years. Some \$5 million between 1998 and 2003 went toward supporting associations of small-scale farmers such as Labradores Mayas.