

Summary of Cancún meeting to discuss Management and Marketing of Sustainably Managed Chamaedorea Palms

Background

Representatives of local communities in Mexico and Guatemala, national and international certifying bodies, universities and Christian congregations gathered in Cancún to discuss an initiative sponsored by the Commission for Environmental Cooperation (CEC) of North America to market sustainably managed and harvested palms of the *Chamaedorea* genus in North America and potentially Europe.¹ The event followed studies prepared by the CEC, documenting the market for the *Chamaedorea* palm in North America and Europe and surveying the interest of Christian congregations in purchasing a sustainably harvested (fairly traded) palm for a price that would permit palm gatherers to increase their income from the harvesting. Those studies demonstrated that: 1) the market for cut palm fronds is a large one, with Christian congregations being one of the more important consumers; and 2) Christian congregations were willing to pay a premium for palms that are sustainably harvested, insuring that a greater percentage of the earnings would go to the individuals and communities doing the gathering. The objective of the meeting was to discuss how to develop a program for sustainably harvesting and marketing the palm to the North American market.

Prior to the meeting a preliminary proposal was prepared, addressing the major issues in developing a marketing program for sustainable palm. Below are the main issues addressed during the meeting:

1. How to inform and market the palm to Christian congregations;
2. How to guarantee a sustainable harvest and fair wage for rural communities doing the harvesting;
3. What are the logistical considerations of transporting the palm from the forest to the congregations;
4. How to ensure, through certification or other mechanisms, that the palms are sustainably produced; and
5. How to move ahead with the marketing of sustainable palm fronds.

The meeting consisted of several presentations by individuals representing the various stakeholder groups and discussion of developing a market for sustainably harvested palm. The meeting was facilitated by Chantal Line Carpentier of the CEC and Dean Current of the University of Minnesota. Below are the topics presented during the meeting:

- North American market and potential to work with Christian congregations: Presentation and discussion, **Dean Current, University of Minnesota**
- Environmental sustainability and social justice aspects/Research needs and mechanisms for guaranteeing palm sustainability, **George Dyer, University of California**
- Marketing palm fronds to Christian congregations, **Sarah Ford, Lutheran World Relief**

¹ See participant list in annexes.

- Logistics of getting palm fronds (a perishable product) from the forest to consumers and congregations, **Rene Ochoa, Texas A&M University**
- Administering the provision and monitoring of a sustainable and fairly priced palm—Who and how? **Anne Utech, Equal Exchange**

At the end of the meeting, participants agreed to go ahead with a pilot project to offer sustainably harvested palms to Christian congregations for the 2004 Easter holiday. A pilot project will provide the opportunity to set up the logistical arrangements necessary to market the palm and test them on a small scale, with the objective of expanding the program in the future. The sale of sustainably harvested palms to Christian congregations for the Easter season is seen as a first step to more widespread use of “certified” palm in the floral industry. It is hoped that members of Christian congregations will learn more about the certified palm and begin to request it for other occasions. The survey of retailers showed that the palms are used extensively for the large floral displays common in weddings and funerals—both activities often taking place in a religious setting. As there is growing recognition of the environmental and social benefits of the palm, the demand may increase through the requests from consumers to retail florists.

It is important to note that, because the focus of the “certification” system being considered is conservation of natural forests and the palm populations they shelter, the program would be limited to palms harvested from natural forests and would not include cultivated palms. Cultivated palms are often produced outside of natural forest conditions and on a much smaller area—reducing the gathering from natural forest areas and the incentive the palms provide to preserve natural forest areas.

Discussion on Workshop Topics

Guaranteeing sustainable harvest and a fair wage for rural communities doing the harvesting

Several communities and organizations representing communities in both Mexico and Guatemala were present at the workshop. Most had experience harvesting and marketing palm, although some were interested in initiating a palm production program. The proposal set forth for the workshop was to develop a program with guidelines for the sustainable harvest of palms which would be accepted by consumers (church congregations in this case) with a monitoring system set up to ensure that palms are harvested sustainably. The second objective would be to set up mechanisms to ensure that the communities and individuals gathering the palm receive a fair wage and, in the case that congregations pay a higher price for the palm, that the greater part of those additional earnings would go to palm gatherers.

Both Guatemala and Mexico have requirements for harvesting palms as part of their permitting procedures for the harvest of palms. Nonetheless, those requirements do not necessarily guarantee a sustainable harvest and recent monitoring efforts in Guatemala have demonstrated a decline/deterioration in palm populations. CONAP, the government agency in Guatemala that manages natural resources in the palm producing areas, together with a USAID project and Smartwood/Rainforest Alliance are developing inventories of palm populations and guidelines and rules for the sustainable harvest and monitoring of palm populations. George Dyer presented information on the social importance of the palm in palm producing areas in Mexico and agreed to also help work on guidelines for the sustainable harvest of palms. Guidelines have been or are

being developed in Mexico and Guatemala and those efforts should be coordinated to come up with guidelines and monitoring aimed at sustainable production and a certification that can be accepted by consumers (again, church congregations for the pilot phase).

Guaranteeing a fair wage for collectors would primarily be accomplished utilizing a price above the current market price that congregations pay and ensuring that most of the additional income would go the gatherers and gathering communities. Ideally this could be accomplished through a higher price paid by congregations, retailers and wholesalers that supply them, which would increase the revenue of the importers and working out agreements with importers to ensure that the extra income is provided to communities. Rene Ochoa has been discussing this with Continental Greens, the first company to import *Chamaedorea* palms and probably the company that imports the greatest quantity of palms at this time. Rene will continue to work with Continental to develop the necessary mechanisms that will work best to accomplish the objectives of the pilot program and be acceptable to Continental Greens.

Another option that will be explored will be to make a more direct connection between producers and consumers—potentially eliminating some of the middlemen and the additional costs they represent. Anna Utech indicated that Equal Exchange had been able to do this with their coffee marketing program. This can cause conflicts with traditional middlemen but Anna indicated they had been able to work through those issues. In Guatemala, the community concessions or a subgroup within them may be a logical unit to work with, while in Mexico the ejidos or again, subgroups of individuals currently involved in palm harvest, may be able to organize to process and sell palms more directly to the market.

An important issue discussed and commented on is avoiding as much as possible at the outset getting communities making significant investments in infrastructure or equipment before that program is well established. For example having communities purchase refrigeration units to set up cold storage facilities. Because of that, for the pilot phase it is recommended that we work through existing channels and with communities who have experience working with palm gathering. As the project expands and a more secure market is established it may be possible to consider bringing in new communities and investments in value-added processing after a thorough feasibility study is prepared. Currently in Guatemala, there are communities that are developing feasibility studies for setting up processing facilities for one or a group of communities and similar studies should be considered for Mexico.

How to inform and market the palm to Christian congregations

The response from Christian congregations surveyed has been very positive. Sarah Ford, coordinator of the Interfaith Fair Trade Initiative in the Lutheran World Relief, felt that it was a worthwhile effort and offered to help promote the sale of sustainable palms through the network she works with. Equal Exchange works extensively with Christian congregations as well and offered their support to this effort. Previous contacts with other Christian groups working with environmental and social justice issues have demonstrated a lot of interest and willingness to provide information about palms to the groups and networks they work with.

Sarah made two important suggestions related to implementing the project. The first was that it would be important to have pictures from the communities showing palm production as well as general conditions of the communities and families that might be participating in the effort. The second was that, for certification, the communities and groups involved working with them

should propose guidelines to the Christian congregations rather than having those congregations involved in establishing guidelines for an activity they know very little about.

As we move ahead with the project it will be important to develop a communication strategy taking advantage of mechanisms such as: articles in church magazines; brochures and bulletin inserts for Christian congregations; presentations at conventions and environmental and social justice related church events; articles in newsletters and information on web sites. We have started to put together a list of church groups working with these issues and Sarah should be able to augment that list.

Logistics of moving the palm from the forest to congregations

An important part of the pilot project will be working out the chain of commercialization of the palm from the forest to the ultimate consumer. The fact that the cut palm fronds are perishable complicates this. Nonetheless, from the importer through to the final consumer in the floral industry, there is a well-established network. To duplicate that network would be costly and difficult. Because of the interest of Continental Greens and Rene's work with them there is an important opportunity to work through that existing network while providing the social and environmental benefits associated with sustainable palm harvest.

The other link in the commercialization chain is from the forest and the gatherers to the importers. Here again, there is interest in eliminating or working closely with middlemen to obtain greater value for the communities gathering the palm. These arrangements will have to be developed working closely with the importer (probably Continental Greens for the pilot project), the communities and any middlemen who would be willing to work with us. In many cases, the importer will have direct contacts with a contractor/middleman, and in those cases, we may be able to take advantage of those links or try to establish more direct links between the community and the importer. In Guatemala, the TREES program [(T)raining, (R)esearch, (E)xtension, (E)ducation and (S)ystems] of Rainforest Alliance has already started to work with local processors to improve benefits for communities gathering the palm. Since these communities already have Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) certification (via the SmartWood program of Rainforest Alliance), there are opportunities to add the palm management to the existing certification.

These links will most likely have to be negotiated and established on a case-by-case basis as the project develops. Rene's work with Continental Greens and their network of producers will likely be important for the pilot project. Another important point raised by Rene through his presentation and also touched on by George Dyer was guaranteeing that the producers involved in this project are capable of delivering the quantities required by the market, of the quality required by that market and their ability to sustain that production into the future so the purchasing companies can count on a consistent supply of certified palm to meet the demand that may be established through this project. Those points will have to be constantly addressed as the project moves forward.

How to ensure that the palms are sustainably produced, through certification or other mechanisms

One of the biggest issues to explore at present is how the palms will be certified or be given some kind of seal that guarantees they come from a community that is sustainably managing its natural palm resources and that harvesters receive a fair price for their palms. The group was in

agreement that, at this point in time, we cannot consider a formal certification such as the FSC certification or a Fair Trade seal, given the time and resources necessary to obtain that type of certification. Although concessions in Guatemala may be receiving that type of certification in the near future, the majority of communities could not do that.

Sarah Ford and others in the group suggested some kind of agreement be set up between producing communities and the congregations receiving the palm that would be acceptable to the congregations. Communities represented at the meeting were asked to provide a list of species and quantity of palm that might be available and proposals for a certification process for the pilot project. It will probably eventually require a committee with representatives from the congregations (probably Sarah), the communities and individuals with technical expertise, such as George Dyer. The committee could take suggestions from communities as well as the work presently being done in Mexico and Guatemala to suggest a set of guidelines for the pilot project that could be refined as we move ahead.

Setting up coordination to move ahead with the marketing of sustainable palm

As the Easter season is approaching there is a need to advance quickly on the pilot project. We have some limited funding to develop the market—probably starting in Minnesota, as Dean Current has worked most on the market and is located there, and also because Minnesota residents are often more willing to engage in such efforts. If various group members have suggestions of other possibilities that should be considered we should discuss those. Following is a breakdown of the activities necessary and suggestions on how to move ahead. To do this, we are considering having this document reviewed by participants for their comments and suggestions; then arranging a conference call to agree upon and initiate a plan of action. This does not mean we cannot start moving ahead and exploring options individually.

1. Establishing demand. We need to start contacting congregations to get an idea of the level of demand. This will require the preparation of the communication strategy.
2. Establishing supply: We need to find out from the communities wishing to participate what quantities of palms they have and could supply sustainably. Initially, this may have to be based on estimates of numbers of available palms, but with guidelines on how to harvest and maintain the palms being harvested. There are already guidelines for that. In the future we could consider inventories and monitoring procedures.
3. Chain of commercialization: We need to find out how Continental Greens would prefer to handle the palms—whether as a separate product line that the company advertises or that it simply receives and distributes the palm based on requests from the wholesalers and retailers it supplies. Churches will have to have instructions on how to order the palms. Dean Current will send more detailed suggestions on this later before the conference call.
4. Certification: We will have to develop the guidelines for the communities to follow if they are to enter the program, as well as the controls necessary to monitor their compliance.
5. Organizational: We need to identify a coordinating organization that will call meetings and coordinate the activities of the program. Up until now the CEC has served that role, in coordination with the University of Minnesota.

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