



SUCCESS STORY

Sweet Onions Yield Sweet Profits

Nearly 500 families reap benefits of organic crop that thrives in local soil



Photo: USAID/Bolivia

Local producers tend to crops of organic sweet onions, which flourish on once-barren land in the Bolivian Andes region of Oruro.

“There were organic onions and sweet onions, but we brought a unique product,” said Marcelo Cespedes, the general manager of Bolivia Produce, who marketed Bolivian organic sweet onions at a trade fair.

Telling Our Story
U.S. Agency for International Development
Washington, DC 20523-1000
<http://stories.usaid.gov>

Located atop the Bolivian Andes, the region of Oruro traditionally has been dependent on its tin mines for its economic well-being. Efforts to break that dependency through agriculture had left Oruro’s farmers among the poorest in Bolivia until recently.

Roman Mamani was a miner in the town of Machacamaraca who was tired of spending long stretches away from his wife and six children just to make ends meet. Now, along with his two sons, he grows organic sweet onions on a parcel of once-barren land five minutes from his home, and his family’s income has doubled.

With assistance provided by USAID, farmers in Oruro and the neighboring region of Cochabamba began planting onions. Although these varieties of onions had not been previously grown in this region, the area’s loose sandy soil, which contains little sulfur, is ideal for sweet onions. In addition, at an altitude of more than 12,000 feet, there is lower disease and pest pressure. This enabled the region’s onion farmers to become the world’s first commercial producers of certified organic sweet onions. The result of this project over the past several years has benefited approximately 500 poor families, increasing their household income on average by about 70 percent.

“Thanks to the onions, we don’t have to leave our community for work,” explained Roman. “Now we export them and we earn more money than we would with other crops.”

Bolivia’s organic sweet onions have been a big hit in the United States. Because the onions are harvested beginning in December (the off-season for U.S. onion growers), the Bolivians have been able to enter a market with tremendous growth potential.

“We have seen 20 percent growth for the past several years,” said Matt Stocks, the organic vegetable buyer for Melissa’s World Variety Produce in Los Angeles. “We buy the product that has the best flavor profile in the market, and the flavor of the Bolivian onion is superior to the others on the market.”