

## **A Brief History of the Evolution of the Sustainable Agriculture Network and *Rainforest Alliance Certified***

In the early 1990s, the banana industry was enjoying good financial times but was under scrutiny from environmentalists and human rights activists. The activists complained about the indiscriminate use of pesticides, water pollution, deforestation, poor conditions for workers, mountains of trash and other problems all readily apparent in the banana growing regions.

The Rainforest Alliance, a New York-based NGO dedicated to the conservation of the world's tropical forests, grew concerned about the deforestation for new banana farms in Ecuador and Costa Rica. Between 1988 and 1994, the land planted in bananas in Costa Rica expanded by 160 percent as producers prepared for the anticipated opening of the European market. Rainforest Alliance members and staff joined local environmentalists in denouncing the banana industry's environmental record.

During that period of plantation expansion, there was abundant criticism of the banana growers, but almost no dialogue between the growers and the greens. The Rainforest Alliance had experience in bringing intransigent industries to the bargaining table. The group had created SmartWood, the first certification program for progressive forest management, and begun to engage the global timber industry in discussions of corporate responsibility. Considering that experience, Alliance staff and Costa Rican conservationists organized study teams to investigate the social and environmental issues in banana production.

The proposal was to create standards for ecofriendly management of banana plantations that took into account all of the major issues and create a comprehensive program that would effectively change the way bananas are grown. Local conservationists, frustrated by their inability to affect the industry through protests, lawsuits and denunciations, knew that a fresh approach was needed. The Costa Ricans, supported by experienced activists in other countries, decided to present to the banana growers exactly what would be required to make their farms acceptable to responsible conservationists. But nobody knew. The critics did not understand the economic, ecological and technical constraints of commercial banana farming, nor did they have practical alternatives. For their part, the banana growers assumed that any concessions to the environment and workers would come at the expense of production and profits.

One objective of the study teams was to create a forum for mutual education and solution-oriented thinking. The teams were comprised of representatives from NGOs, government agencies, research organizations, and the banana companies as well as community leaders and of course the banana farmers themselves. The process took place during 1991 and 1992. The groups discussed pesticide management, waste management, forest conservation, protection of wildlife and rivers, soil conservation, worker conditions and benefits, and other issues. Their challenge was to make practical, feasible and concrete recommendations.

The recommendations were forged into nine general principles and a series of farm management standards. The principles and standards support the widely accepted definition of sustainable agriculture as consisting of practices that are ecologically sound, socially responsible and economically viable. Within the program, these pillars of sustainability are called Community, well-managed Cultivation, and Conservation – in other words, the famous “Three Es” of sustainability – Economy, Ecology and Ethics.

In 1992, with a growing list of management standards in hand, the conservationists began testing them on farms and inviting banana producers to do the same. The greens devised certification protocols and offered an ecolabel, dubbed ECO-O.K., to any farm that could meet the standards. Two independent producers in Hawaii and Costa Rica won certification in 1993. The Costa Rican subsidiary of Chiquita Brands began making the social and environmental improvements on all of its farms. Eventually the company made the commitment to certify all of its farms in the region and began investing millions of dollars to make the required changes.

Favorita Fruit Hldg., a major company in Ecuador, also joined the program. By 1996, a coalition of conservation groups was involved in the program – now called the Better Banana Project -- and reviewing farms in six countries. The NGOs were also working to change citrus, coffee, cocoa and sugar cane farms. The first ECO-O.K. coffee farm was certified in Guatemala in 1996. A cooperative of small cocoa producers in Ecuador won the first ecofriendly certification for that crop in 1998.

After years of working together in a loose association, four groups involved in conservation certification for agriculture products founded the Sustainable Agriculture Network (SAN) in 1998. The founding groups were the

Corporacion de Conservacion y Desarrollo in Ecuador, IMAFLORA in Brazil, the Fundacion Interamericana de Investigacion Tropical in Guatemala and the Rainforest Alliance in the United States.

The SAN is a new kind of relationship between NGOs North and South. All the members have equal rights and authority. Together, they set policy and direction and approve changes in the standards. All the groups use the same certification principals and protocols. They all use the same general standards, and each group can adapt the very specific and detailed indicators to make them most meaningful and effective in their countries. All groups follow the same procedure for inspecting and auditing farms, the same format for reports and the same scoring system.

The Rainforest Alliance serves as International SAN Secretariat. All certification reports and supporting documents are centralized in Costa Rica. Alliance staff monitor quality of certification services and conduct training exercises and seminars. The secretariat organizes an annual SAN conference and technical meetings throughout the year. The secretariat is responsible for monitoring the use of the ecolabel on products and in publicity and for legal registrations of the certification marks.

There are now ten groups in the SAN plus a Danish NGO that serves as a watchdog. The new countries represented include: Belize, Colombia, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Honduras and Mexico. The SAN awards the *Rainforest Alliance Certified* seal of approval to farms that meet the standards and commit to continuous improvements. The "ECO-O.K." seal was retired in 2001.

At the beginning of 2004, the program was active in 11 Latin American countries and had certified hundreds of farms and cooperatives, large and small, for total combined areas as follows:

Bananas	58,505 hectares
Cacao	314 hectares
Citrus	7,050 hectares
Coffee	28,337 hectares
Ornamental ferns	516 hectares

An estimated 14% of all the bananas in international trade come from *Rainforest Alliance Certified* farms, and the market share of certified sustainable coffee is growing quickly.

The SAN program is rooted in fundamental precepts and convictions arranged in the following hierarchy: values, principles, standards and indicators. The *values* form the philosophical foundation that supports the nine *principles*. The *standards* and the more detailed *indicators* are used to measure farm compliance with the principles. For example, there are 256 specific measures for banana farms. All SAN certification projects in all countries and for all crops abide by the same values and principles. There are general standards that apply to all crops. Some standards and indicators change from one crop or country to another.

Trained inspectors evaluate the farms, using a standardized checklist and scoring system. The certification protocols are designed to maximize objectivity, transparency and independence. The decision whether or not to award certification to a farm is made by an independent certification committee based on the reports submitted by the inspection teams.

In order to ensure that smallholders have good access to certification services, the Rainforest Alliance developed protocols for auditing small farms in groups to reduce the burden on individual farms.

The farm evaluation criteria measure achievement and progress in the following nine areas.

#### SAN Principals of Sustainable Agriculture

1. ECOSYSTEM CONSERVATION: Farmers should promote the conservation and recuperation of ecosystems within and around production areas.

2. WILDLIFE CONSERVATION: Concrete and constant measures must be taken to protect biodiversity, especially endangered species and their habitats.
3. FAIR TREATMENT AND GOOD CONDITIONS FOR WORKERS: Agriculture should improve the well-being and standard of living for farmers, workers and their families.
4. COMMUNITY RELATIONS: Farms must be “good neighbors” to nearby communities and a positive part of their economic and social development.
5. INTEGRATED PEST MANAGEMENT: Farmers should enlist nature and diversity as an ally in maintaining a healthy farm. Pesticides may only be used as a last resort and must be strictly controlled to protect the health and safety of workers, communities and the environment.
6. COMPLETE, INTEGRATED MANAGEMENT OF WASTES: Farmers must have a waste management plan to Reduce, Reuse and Recycle wherever possible and properly manage all wastes.
7. CONSERVATION OF WATER RESOURCES: All pollution and contamination must be controlled and waterways must be protected with vegetative barriers.
8. SOIL CONSERVATION: Erosion must be controlled and soil health and fertility should be maintained and enriched where possible.
9. ENVIRONMENTAL PLANNING AND MONITORING: Agricultural activities should be planned, monitored and evaluated, considering economic, social and environmental aspects.

The beneficiaries of the program include the workers, the environment, the neighboring communities, consumers, and the farmers themselves. All workers have a clean and safe workplace, access to medical care and training, and the proper equipment. On-farm families have dignified housing, access to schools, potable drinking water, and other basic services. The workforce benefits are so favorable that workers now compete for employment on certified farms. Farm managers compete with each other to have the “cleanest and greenest” farm. Some companies give bonuses to workers and managers of certified farms. About 80,000 rural families benefit directly from the program.