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### Excitement builds south of the border for organic products

**By Barbara Haumann**

**R**ecently, I had the opportunity to see firsthand how excited organic farmers in Central America and the Caribbean are about organic production and the possibilities it presents, both as a livelihood and a way to produce quality food while rejuvenating their land.

Offering this window was the Third Encuentro

Mesoamericano y Del Caribe de Productores Experimentadores e Investigadores en Producción Orgánica, held early in October in Chapingo, Mexico, and hosted by the University of Chapingo with collaborative support from FiBL (Research Institute of Organic Agriculture) based in Switzerland. Focusing on efforts in Central America and the Caribbean to raise crops organically, the meeting brought together organic producers and researchers from the region.

The primary aim was to provide an interchange of knowledge and to explore what works, what improvements are still needed, and common concerns and hurdles.

Since the first meeting in the series held in 2003 in Costa Rica and a subsequent meeting in 2004 in Cuba, attendance has grown substantially, reaching approximately 300 participants this year, including 70 from outside of Mexico. Attendees came from Mexico, Cuba, Guatemala, the Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua and Costa Rica, as well as the South American country of Paraguay. I was the only one in attendance from the United States; my role was to speak about the U.S. market for organic products in an international session during the meeting.

Tours prior to the conference set the foundation for knowledge sharing. Practices demonstrated



Terracing and intercropping are among the practices used.

included terracing to help prevent erosion, a wide diversification of plantings, intercropping, crop rotation, tree plantings to help hold the soil, composting to help rejuvenate the earth, use of animals (such as chickens and ducks) in cropping areas to help control pests and to provide more organic material, and the incorporation of such beneficial organisms as red worms and butterflies. Conservation of water and land, as well as an emphasis on biodiversity, were seen as benefits of adopting organic methods. The ultimate goals: to provide a better life for farmers and the earth, and better quality of food for consumers.

Taken to the birthplace of maize (corn), we couldn't help but notice that corn grows throughout the Mexican countryside along the roadsides, in ditches, on mountainsides, and in crevices. But

the organic corn we observed was magnificent, towering up eight to ten feet in places, and interspersed with cacti, squash, beans, and other plants. There were no monotonous rows of cookie cutter specimens. The organic operations we visited were vibrant with life. Across the roadside, hills where soils had been depleted and eroded lay barren and spent.

Also demonstrated were practices used by Tosepan Titataniske, a large cooperative in Mexico with 5,800 members in ten municipalities that grow and sell organic coffee beans and roasted coffee, honey, and bamboo, among other products. Among the stops was a visit to a demonstration station where the cooperative starts seedlings to provide to its members, and hatches butterflies to provide beneficial organisms for crops.

Social responsibility and environmental sustainability were recurrent themes during the tours and three-day meeting that focused primarily on providing an interchange of ideas about organic practices. Other sessions explored the markets, both domestically and internationally, for organic products from the region. In addition, much discussion concerned the benefits of standards and norms within communities to help build markets and consumer acceptance for organic products.

Although Mexico is in the midst of implementing a national regulation, parties within Mexico noted that for small indigenous producers who market mainly in their local region, branding or use of a designated mark is a more affordable and realistic route than seeking certification under a national standard. One way to

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accomplish this is to be part of a cooperative or sustainable group that has its own set of guidelines, inspection and product branding.

Several operations that provide certification or branding related their experiences. In addition, there was discussion about the Fair Trade movement. Carried throughout was a sense of respecting local cultures and local knowledge while taking steps to help attain sustainable agriculture. In parts of Mexico, for instance, much of the soil has degraded due to unsustainable practices. Demonstrating what works to help revive and replenish these soils is slowly having its effect, with model communities showing what can be accomplished, and organic farmers' markets being established to sell the resulting products. Meanwhile, communicating the benefits of buying organic products to



A grain-handling unit at the Vicente Guerrero rural development center.

consumers in general is still a challenge. Participants stressed that one route to spread the word about the importance of sustainable practices is to educate schoolchildren about the benefits of

organic farming and consuming organic products. The stops on the tour I took already have adopted that strategy.

Also discussed were the potential markets for a wide range of tropical products, from coffee, chocolate, nuts, and spices, to tropical fruits and vegetables.

At the close of the conference, participants voted to open next year's meeting to representatives from throughout Latin American, including all of South America. Nicaragua was chosen to host the 2006 event.

Dominant throughout the meeting and interchange among participants was a passion about organic agriculture that was palpable. The aim: to nurture healthier soil, produce better food, and provide a better life for all. It's where it all begins.

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