

PolicyPennings by Dr. Daryll E. Ray

Colombia's "Juan Valdez" to produce corn as well as coffee

In the middle of June, 2007, one half of this writing team traveled to Bogotá, Colombia to deliver an address to Fenalce's 20th National Congress. Fenalce, Colombia's National Federation of Growers of Cereals and Legumes, is funded by a national tax on sales of corn, sorghum, wheat, red beans, and dried beans and provides 500,000 grower/members of these crops with research and support.

Not surprisingly, the number one question on the mind of Colombian farmers was, "How long will the current high corn prices last?" To address that question, Harwood's address was titled, "Maize and Ethanol: Are the Current High Prices Sustainable?" In that presentation he talked about many of the issues that have been covered in recent columns, including the need for a corn reserve to protect both consumers and producers. Before addressing Fenalce's 20th Congress, he had the opportunity to spend two days observing Colombian agriculture and talking to farmers.

The first day was spent in Monteria in the north of the country. The land in the coastal plain is very flat. Annual rainfall in the area averages around 120 inches. To drain excess water from the fields, farmers have dug deep ditches around the perimeter of the fields. In this area corn and cotton are the major crops, some of it planted by hand and some planted using planters like those used in the US.

Farmers around Monteria plant are using lower plant populations than are typical in the US corn belt. There is some interest in whether or not producers can obtain higher yields with higher plant populations, but as of yet there are no clear answers for the varieties used in that area.

Peasant producers in the area intercrop corn with other crops like beans and cassava.

Fenalce has an agreement with CIMMYT, the International Maize and Wheat Improvement Center, to develop tropical corn hybrids that will provide farmers with higher yields. Some of the new varieties yield 120 to 140 bushels per acre under field conditions. Given the warm weather and abundant rainfall farmers are able to grow two crops a year (corn-cotton rotation), with the highest yields observed in the main growing season.

The second day began in Pereira, the center of Colombia's coffee growing region. Colombia's

coffee farmers are organized in the National Federation of Coffee Growers (FNC) and are best known in the US through the Juan Valdez advertising campaign. In the area around Pereira, Fenalce and FNC are conducting research on intercropping corn among coffee trees.

Coffee trees produce for about five years when they are cut back and forced to sprout new growth. During that year, farmers are unable to harvest coffee from those plants. Intercropping corn, tomatoes, or beans provides coffee farmers with some income on the renewal ground.

Fenalce and FNC are conducting this research using CIMMYT tropical and subtropical corn genetics to develop varieties of white corn for human consumption. In corn fields, the new varieties yield 130 to 145 bushels per acre with proportional yields under intercropping conditions.

Traveling south through the Cauca river valley, corn production gives way to vast fields of sugar cane. Just north of Palmira, is a large sugar crush facility. Recently, a sugar to ethanol plant has been built adjacent to the sugar plant. The facility is equipped with state of the art electronic controls and monitors, giving the plant operators minute by minute status reports of the conversion process. Forty percent of the carbon dioxide produced in the conversion process is captured instead of being released into the environment.

At the present time Colombia imports 70 to 80 percent of its corn consumption. Colombia has some savannah land similar to the Brazilian cerrados that have been converted to soybean production. Some Colombian farmers are looking to develop their savannah land and use it to grow corn for domestic consumption. Most of the corn grown in the savannah land will probably be used as animal feed.

Like US farmers, Colombian farmers would like to be able to provide all of the corn needed for domestic consumption so they don't have to rely on imports.

Daryll E. Ray holds the Blasingame Chair of Excellence in Agricultural Policy, Institute of Agriculture, University of Tennessee, and is the Director of UT's Agricultural Policy Analysis Center (APAC). (865) 974-7407; Fax: (865) 974-7298; dray@utk.edu; <http://www.agpolicy.org>. Daryll Ray's column is written with the research and assistance of Harwood D. Schaffer, Research Associate with APAC.

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