

Colombia's Coca Survives U.S. Plan to Uproot It

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Luca Zanetti for The New York Times

Although U.S. efforts to eradicate coca have made inroads, farmers like Jhon Freddy Romero aren't worried.

BOGOTÁ, [Colombia](#) — The latest chapter in America's long war on drugs — a six-year, \$4.7 billion effort to slash Colombia's coca crop — has left the price, quality and availability of cocaine on American streets virtually unchanged.



The effort, begun in 2000 and known as Plan Colombia, had a specific goal of halving this country's coca crop in five years. That has not happened. Instead, drug policy experts say, coca, the essential ingredient for cocaine, has been redistributed to smaller and harder-to-reach plots, adding to the cost and difficulty of the drug war.

Bush administration officials say that coca farmers are on the run, and that the leftist guerrillas and right-wing paramilitaries who feed on drug profits are weaker than ever. That has made Colombia, Washington's closest ally in a tumultuous region, more stable, they say. They argue that the plan has scored important successes, like a spike in the price of cocaine last year.

But that claim was disputed by a wide range of drug policy experts, and some politicians are questioning the drug war's results as well as its assumptions.

The plan seemed simple enough. "The closer we can attack to the source, the greater the likelihood of halting the flow of drugs altogether," a State Department report said soon after Plan Colombia began. "If we destroy crops or force them to remain unharvested, no drugs will enter the system."

Yet recent data show the following results:

¶As much coca is cultivated today in Colombia as was grown at the start of the large-scale aerial fumigation effort in 2000, according to State Department figures.

¶Colombia, Peru and Bolivia, the leading sources of coca and cocaine, produce more than enough cocaine to satisfy world demand, and possibly as much as in the mid-1990's, the [United Nations](#) says.

¶In the [United States](#), the government's tracking over the past quarter century shows that the price of cocaine has tumbled and that purity remains high, signs that the drug is as available as ever.

Over all, demand in the United States has dipped in recent years, but experts say that may be a result of many factors, including changing social fads and better law enforcement techniques at home. Meanwhile, demand is rising in Brazil, Europe, Africa and elsewhere.

"If we were to evaluate Plan Colombia by its initial overriding criteria, the results of the drug war have been dubious at best," said Russell Crandall, a former adviser to the White House and the author of "Driven by Drugs," a book on the drug war in the Andes.

"We can switch metaphors — saying it is first and 10, second and 4, light at the end of the tunnel — but what's left are often discouraging results on reducing the amount of drugs and cocaine in the United States," he added.

A Wider War

Bush administration officials believe that verdict is too harsh. "Over the past five years, you see a compression on cultivation," John P. Walters, director of the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy, said in an interview. "You see the remaining cultivation and trafficking in Colombia under pressure as you've never seen it before."

The lingering question is whether America's drug problem would be worse today had the drug war, nearly 40 years in the making, never been waged. That may be unanswerable.

What is clear is that the war on drugs, the original open-ended war against an elusive and ill-defined enemy, has moved inexorably onward, propelled by decades of mostly unflagging political support on both sides of the Congressional aisle.

Jon Caulkins, a drug policy expert at [Carnegie Mellon University](#), echoing other analysts, estimates that the drug war has cost American taxpayers upward of \$40 billion annually in recent years, though there is no comprehensive government tally of all its state and federal spending.

Today that money goes for patrol boats, prisons, police departments and extradition flights to bring drug kingpins to trial in the United States — not to mention a dedicated federal bureaucracy.

Plan Colombia, initiated by the Clinton administration, has been embraced by the Bush White House, the seventh administration to take up a drug war begun under [President Nixon](#).

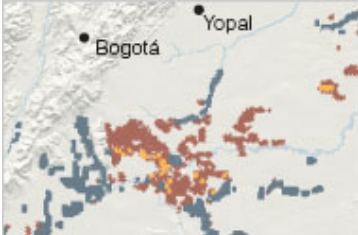
Bush administration officials say this latest phase, the largest foreign assistance program outside the Middle East, will take still more time, but they insist that Plan Colombia is making inroads.

The seizure of cocaine in the Andes has more than tripled to nearly 400,000 pounds in 2005 from about 132,000 pounds in 2001, it says. The number of traffickers extradited to the United States in the last four years tops 350. The number of clandestine drug labs destroyed by the authorities in Colombia soared to nearly 2,000 last year from 317 in 1999.

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Graphic: [Coca's Changing Landscape](#)

Many drug policy analysts, including some who have advised the government, are less sanguine, however. Even the most optimistic see the drug war as just about holding the line.

“In Colombia and an area as difficult as the Andean range, it’s hard to say that there’s been tremendous success, but it’s also hard to say that there has been tremendous failure,” said Eduardo Gamarra, a drug policy expert at Florida International University in Miami who has consulted with both the American government and the United Nations.

Progress itself is difficult to measure, experts caution. Numbers of arrests, acres fumigated or tons seized may not provide the most accurate snapshot, simply because it is hard to say what portion of the total hidden trade they actually make up.

But by any estimate, the amount of cocaine produced vastly exceeds demand, so much so that even headline-grabbing seizures do not cut deeply enough into the supply to affect price or availability. That has been the case for years.

Guerrilla Farming

Indeed, a better measure of the war’s progress may be taken at the endpoint — the price, availability and purity of cocaine on American streets — and by those indicators, the results of the drug war are far from promising, experts say.

“Prices are still the same,” said Richard Curtis, chairman of the anthropology department at the [John Jay College of Criminal Justice](#), who has studied drug patterns for 30 years.

“They go up and down seasonally,” he added, “but there has not been significant change in price, and there has not been any change in availability or purity.”

Domestic spending on drug war-related projects dwarfs foreign spending, which includes interdiction on the high seas, fumigation, border patrols and other programs that total about \$4 billion a year. Yet that foreign spending has in many ways come to define American policy in the region.

Since 2000, crop dusters flown by American and other foreign pilots, accompanied by attack helicopters, have sprayed the equivalent of Central Park 2,600 times in Colombia. In Peru and Bolivia, where the governments oppose aerial fumigation, troops have entered coca-growing regions to pull up the plants by hand, often in the face of protests.

But coca farmers like Jhon Freddy Romero seem anything but worried. In the southern Colombian state of Guaviare, where coca first appeared in the 1970’s, he plays a persistent game of cat and mouse with American antidrug planners.

Time and again, American crop dusters have pounded Mr. Romero's small farm with defoliants, leaving withered coca plants in their wake. Undaunted, he repeats the tried-and-true strategy of guerrilla farming, replanting his coca on the edge of a forest where it is harder to spray.

"All this was fumigated — all of it — and then replanted," Mr. Romero, 28, said recently as he waved his hand at the five acres of coca.

All across the country, coca farmers use similar methods. They hide their coca under larger banana plants. If their crops are hit, they prune the stalks, hoping to save the roots. Some go so far as to lather their leaves with concoctions of all kinds, hoping to weaken the defoliants.

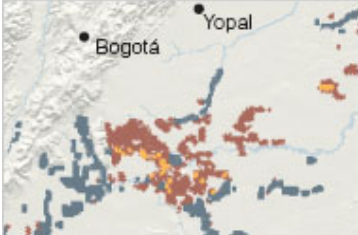
For local farmers, the incentive to plant and preserve their coca crop is enormous; few other crops pay as well or as consistently as coca. "We all have a hectare or so of coca," said one farmer, Joel Rubio, 40, in Caldas, a western state better known for coffee. "You keep doing it."

And America's antidrug planes keep spraying. As the coca crop spreads out in Colombia, they must now fumigate three times as much land as they did in 2002 just to kill the same amount of coca, according to State Department data.

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[Slide Show: Guerrilla Farming in Colombia](#)



[Graphic: Coca's Changing Landscape](#)

"The spray program has itself increased the difficulty of carrying out the spray program," said John Walsh, who tracks American drug policy for the Washington Office on Latin America, a nonprofit research and human rights group. "And as a result it becomes less efficient and it becomes more costly to accomplish the same thing."

"The bang for the buck that people are expecting hasn't materialized," he added.

Not all the news is bad. The latest United Nations estimates, released in June, show a 28 percent decline in the coca crop for the three Andean countries since Plan Colombia began.

But while that may seem like a big bite, experts say the drop is not significant, because the amount of coca produced so vastly exceeds global demand. Year after year, in fact, the coca crop may be a third larger than is needed, they estimate.

A Regional Worry

State Department figures are far gloomier than those of the United Nations, a disparity attributed to different satellite measurements and a broader survey done last year by the United States that covered 81 percent more area in Colombia — and found still more coca.

After swift declines in the late 1990's, the figures show, coca plantings in Peru and Bolivia are actually on the rise. Total acreage in the Andes is now higher than in 2000, and covers as much ground as it did in 1997, the equivalent of half of Delaware.

The United Nations sees the data as distressing, illustrating the need to add a state presence in lawless coca-growing regions while providing lasting alternatives to poor farmers, something Plan Colombia devotes far less money to.

“Colombia is the only country in the world where the problem of eradication has been resolved 10 times,” said Sandro Calvani, chief of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime in Bogotá, which monitors the size of coca fields. “The problem is the replanting.”

Bush administration officials say the emphasis on eradication and interdiction is right.

David Murray, a senior drug policy analyst at the White House, sees success in the move by coca farmers to smaller plots, which he says are less productive and farther from traditional drug trafficking routes. Coca farmers, he says, are barely keeping up with the spraying. “We are gradually constricting them,” he said. “This is a trade whose days are numbered.”

As proof, the drug czar's office reported last November that in 2005 the price of a gram of cocaine on American streets had risen to \$170 and that purity had fallen. The White House describes the uptick as a sharp and positive change of direction.

But some analysts, like Peter Reuter, a drug policy expert at the [University of Maryland](#), questioned the new numbers because the White House did not reveal its methodology. If viewed over the long term, he said, the price remained low compared to the price of cocaine in the early 1990's.

“Even if you take it at face value, it really is a minor change,” said Mr. Reuter, who is also co-director of the Drug Policy Research Center at the RAND Corporation and was part of a research team that studied cocaine’s price and purity for the White House.

The White House says it was transparent about how it reached its conclusions, but the recent claims of success have sparked criticism even among some [Republicans](#) in Congress.

In an April letter to Mr. Walters of the White House drug policy office, Senator [Charles E. Grassley](#), a Republican from Iowa who leads the caucus on International Narcotics Control, questioned whether data were being selectively used to “provide a rosier but not necessarily more accurate picture of the current situation.”

“You have to wonder, if there are more hectares being sprayed, why you get more cultivation,” Mr. Grassley said in an interview about the program. “I’m not willing to dump it at this point, but I think there are a lot of legitimate questions about it.”

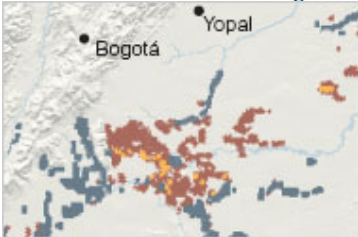
Mr. Grassley said that while he continues to support fumigation, it is becoming clear that antidrug planners “have to find some way to adapt to the new way of cultivation.”

Then there is the drug war’s political impact on the region. Mr. Grassley agrees with administration officials who credit the fumigation plan with helping Colombia to sharply reduce violence by beefing up security in many towns, aiding the fight against leftist guerrillas.

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[Graphic: Coca’s Changing Landscape](#)

But while the cartels of flamboyant kingpins like Pablo Escobar are gone, and the leftist insurgency is on its heels, today right-wing paramilitary commanders operate the drug trafficking routes instead. Drug-related corruption scandals have plagued even the upper reaches of Colombia's intelligence service and its army.

Elsewhere, critics say, the drug war has helped sow instability, particularly in Bolivia, where a former leader of the coca growers union, Evo Morales, is now the president. He has resisted Washington's hard-line efforts to eradicate coca.

Signs of Success

Still, authorities in the United States say they believe the drug war in Latin America, coupled with an emphasis on tougher law enforcement, has made American cities safer than at the height of the crack epidemic in the 1980's and early 1990's.

"We have eliminated a lot of open-air markets, we have reclaimed a lot of neighborhoods," said Bridget Brennan, the special narcotics prosecutor for New York City. "In many neighborhoods, it is still a problem, but it is not as big a problem as it was 15 years ago."

Many drug users, even of cocaine, today shun crack. The National Household Survey on Drug Use and Health says cocaine use among high school students is 60 percent lower today than in 1985.

But that does not mean that America's cocaine addiction is going away. Some government surveys show a rising number of teenagers using the drug for the first time. While the number of hard-core cocaine users — those who drive the trade — may be declining, they still number anywhere from two million to three million people, experts estimate.

No matter the statistics, in the South Bronx, addicts and drug counselors at CitiWide Harm Reduction, a needle-exchange and counseling center, said the drug war has made little difference to them.

Addicts say cocaine is as easy to get as ever, and that a gram can be had for \$40 or less, down from \$100 years ago. Walter Droz, 45, who has used cocaine for 30 years, just shakes his head when he hears claims of progress in Colombia.

"Cocaine availability has gone up, so how can they be so brazen to say it's working?" he said. "If you know where to look, you can find what you want."