

# Certifying Coffee Aids Farmers and Forests in Chiapas

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NUEVO PARAÍSO, [Mexico](#) — Miguel Moshán Méndez's troubles have piled up over the past two years.

Like other coffee growers here in the impoverished state of Chiapas, he suffered devastating losses when Hurricane Stan passed through 18 months ago, tearing coffee trees from hillsides. He lost half his trees, then borrowed money to get by. Now, he must find extra work as a laborer to pay his debt, which will make it harder to maintain his tiny farm.

“I have always fallen to the moneylender, God yes,” he said, sitting in the office of his coffee-growing cooperative.

One source of hope: the increasing number of programs that help growers get higher prices for their beans if they show that they are protecting the environment, investing in community projects and treating workers well.

Most of the programs are run by nongovernmental organizations, or N.G.O.'s, intent on both improving the lot of farmers and the environment in the world's coffee-producing regions. The N.G.O.'s certify coffee that meets their standards, banking on the notion that consumers will pay higher prices for coffee produced with concern for workers and the environment. They believe that, in turn, will drive up the price that companies are willing to pay the farmers.

Mr. Moshán Méndez's cooperative sells to Starbucks, which has a similar in-house program that pays higher prices to farmers who meet its standards.

In this coffee region, known as Jaltenango, on the eastern slopes of the Sierra Madre, the programs appear to be making a difference, farmers say. Higher prices for certified beans have trickled down to some growers, and certification has had an environmental impact.

In the past, the area has lost forest when poor farmers cut trees and switched to cattle ranching or growing corn to try to make more money than they did cultivating coffee beans. When the farmers earn enough money to stick with coffee instead, the forest is protected; coffee trees here are traditionally planted under a canopy of indigenous trees.

The rush to certify coffee is now drawing an expanding list of players, including giant plantations and multinational traders, something that seemed unimaginable just a few years ago.

“We have sold the idea to producers that this is life insurance,” said Santiago Arguello, who is in charge of certified coffee programs at Agroindustrias Unidas, or AMSA, the Mexican subsidiary of the giant trader ECOM Agroindustrial Corporation, based in Switzerland. “If we don’t learn to work with the little producer, the whole business will disappear.”

Such trading companies, the middlemen between growers and the corporations that roast the beans and sell coffee, have not been acclaimed for their social conscience in the past. Now as Mr. Arguello, himself a third-generation coffee farmer, sketched plans for his company to sell more certified coffee, he scrolled through a catalog of community projects he is urging importers in Europe and North America to finance.

Pioneers in the certified coffee movement watch the changes with wary approval.

“The good thing is that you see these ideas gaining traction,” said Rodney North, a board member at Equal Exchange, an importer in West Bridgewater, Mass., that has bought coffee under the Fair Trade certification program since 1986.

The most important element of Fair Trade, he said, is that it demands that buyers of the coffee it certifies pay higher than market price, and that the fixed price holds even if the market collapses. Other programs do not set a price, but those who run them argue that trading companies and smaller buyers will pay to assure a high quality supply.

The price for Fair Trade organic coffee has long been fixed at \$1.41 a pound and this year it will rise to \$1.51 compared with the market price of about \$1.08.

But as the certification programs spread, they are drawing large plantations, or fincas, to join, raising worries among small-scale producers who fear they will lose their advantage as the original suppliers.

Rancho Custepec, one of the state's largest coffee plantations, is one of the newcomers and is working with the Rainforest Alliance.

As part of the certification process, Armando Pohlenz, the grandson of the plantation's founder, said he planned to put about eight square miles of his land in trust for El Triunfo reserve, a refuge for dozens of rare animals, including the quetzal.

Mr. Pohlenz said he applied to the Rainforest Alliance when he was looking for a long-term contract and a better price for his coffee, and one of his American buyers recommended that program. To get the certification, he also has had to improve workers' safety conditions at the ranch's mill.

Sixto Bonilla, the manager at the Cesmach co-op in Ángel Albino Corzo, the area's largest town, said such competition from plantations would force changes among smaller producers. "If we want to stay in the business, we have to find the way to be more competitive," said Mr. Bonilla, whose co-op sells under the Fair Trade label.

One morning last month near the end of the harvest, Margarito Robledo Vásquez watched as workers unloaded his coffee from a pickup truck into the Cesmach warehouse.

He had left his house before dawn to make the two-hour drive down the dirt mountain roads. He raked his fingers through the almond-colored unhusked beans in an open sack. "This puts a meal on the table for lots of families," he said.

Belonging to the cooperative — and selling Fair Trade-certified beans — has paid off where it matters most: his daughters' education. Two have college degrees, the other two are studying for them.

Over at the Comon Yaj Noc Pic co-op — the cooperative Mr. Moshán Méndez is part of — the farmers have placed their hope in the Starbucks relationship.

The co-op will receive \$1.23 a pound this harvest from Starbucks, said Juan Carlos Cameras, a co-op official. (Starbucks pays \$1.43 but AMSA, the trading company that is Starbucks's buying agent in the region, takes its cut.)

With photos in Starbucks's Mexican stores, the cooperative has become a showpiece for the chain's Mexican franchisee, which has pledged \$150,000 to the co-op's social projects over the next three years, including a computer center for online high school classes, dormitories for the students and a sports field.

But for all the benefits of certified coffee, the plans have barely begun to blunt the acute poverty in Chiapas, the legacy of centuries of feudal relationships that are only now breaking down. "We should not think that Fair Trade can solve all the problems of inequality here," Mr. Bonilla said.