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Certifying Organizations: Projects, Progress and Products

Increased sales of certified products provide motivation for the industry to invest in and reward sustainable production, both of which contribute to the growth of on-the-ground sustainable production practices. This in turn, brings more sustainably-sourced products to market, and eventually back to consumers. [By Rachel Northrop](#)

With so many uncertain influences affecting coffee and tea production, one important goal of certifying organizations is to provide stability to producers. Stability at origin increases the sustainability of the supply chain as a whole. Certifiers work to alleviate some of the uncertainty at origin, thus radiating stability up the chain.

The two fair trade systems, Fair Trade USA and Fairtrade International, seek to pair economic stability—the guaranteed floor prices and per-pound premiums on

which they were founded—with initiatives to contribute to production stability in the face of rapidly changing environments and climates. UTZ focuses on making sustainable farming the “norm” in coffee, tea and cocoa production, as does Rainforest Alliance, which also aims to increase responsibly-sourced coffee and tea. 4C works to ensure best practices through the supply chain, while Bird Friendly wants coffee farms viewed as whole ecosystems that provide habitats for birds and other species. Below is a round-

up of leading certifying organizations’ recent achievements and future projects.

Fair Trade USA (Oakland, Calif.)

In 2013 Fair Trade USA’s (FT USA) brought on 83 new coffee roasters and traders, and helped launch over 200 new Fair Trade Certified coffee products into the North American market including Coffee Bean and Tea Leaf’s (Los Angeles) 100-percent Fair Trade University Blend, while FT USA-certified farmers earned an average of \$0.84-\$0.89 USD per pound above the C-market price.

FT USA also launched a new “By-the-Cup” program, to better understand and address the needs of the foodservice industry. At origin, FT USA initiated co-op projects in Aceh, Indonesia, Chiapas, Mexico, and Western Uganda, “an origin with very limited Fair Trade activity, [where] we’re helping 4,000 small-scale cooperative farmers earn certification, improve quality and increase productivity,” noted Jenna Larson, public relations manager, Fair Trade USA.

The end of 2013 marked the close of Fair Trade USA's 2-year coffee pilot program. At its completion the program had certified 10 different pilots, representing 2,300 farm workers and 6,700 independent smallholders.

Looking Forward

In the first few months of 2014, Fair Trade USA held workshops in Brazil and Honduras to review the pilot process and identify key challenges, successes and opportunities with program participants and key NGOs.

Larson commented, "With support from the Skoll Foundation and others, we're implementing a new system to better track, understand and report on the real impact of Fair Trade certification. We tested this program with our coffee pilots in 2013, using our Labor Link technology." Labor Link is a product of the Oakland, Calif.-based non-profit Good World Solutions and uses cellular phones to gather up-to-the-minute information directly from farmers and workers.

Access to information and technology are at the core of business stability for downstream industry players, and producers can also benefit from these same tools. Fair Trade USA's new bi-weekly Market Updates help producers understand and manage market trends. Larson explained, "With a cross section of industry participants, we identified best practices for price risk management and contracting at the cooperative level and are developing case studies to be shared in later this year. The goal is to provide timely information in producers' native tongues to help increase their understanding of all components that influence coffee market trends. This is information that many have never before had access to, and it's actionable." Updates summarize global events affecting the market, demand and supply figures, and past price trends.

Fairtrade International (Bonn, Germany)

Fairtrade International recognized the need for their standards to more fully reflect the daily lives of hired workers on

plantations and estates. A press release accompanying the January 2014 unveiling of the new Standard for Hired Labor stated, "Fairtrade International Standards Unit met with more than 400 workers in 14 countries. We received feedback from workers on the proposed changes during 18 workshops and on-site group interviews," Elisabeth Bystrom, project manager in Fairtrade International's Standards Unit said of a workshop in Sri Lanka.

The resulting Hired Labor Standard applies to tea, which is grown predominantly on estates, (and not to coffee production, which is concentrated in the hands of smallholders). It includes more comprehensive requirements regarding freedom of association, and a clearer definition of living wage requirements for workers.

Fairtrade International is also committed to engaging with future generations of producers in the coffee lands. Portland, Ore.-based importer Sustainable Harvest teamed up with Fairtrade International to offer a grant to the youth of the SOPPEX-CCA cooperative in Nicaragua to manage their eco-tourism project. This grant "represents an economic alternative for young people," said Fatima Ismael, general manager of the co-op.

Beyond entrepreneurship, young adults in the coffee lands are building a future for themselves through education. Thirty students from the Universidad

Centroamericana (UCA) in Managua, Nicaragua applied classroom theory to practical situations with Fairtrade producers in Honduras. This is the best case scenario of a certifier acting as a facilitator. The members of producing nations and communities lead the charge to create production models that are socially and culturally sustainable and demonstrate that university studies and agriculture can be mutually supportive, rather than mutually exclusive, as youth of producing communities often perceive them to be.

Looking Forward

Fairtrade International's continued projects also include climate adaptation initiatives. With support from Lidl, a chain of grocery stores based in Neckarsul, Germany, members of the Sonomoro Cooperative in Pangoa, Peru, are receiving training to cope with the effects of climate change. Ten lead farmers were trained by Twin Trading (London) to conduct risk and opportunity assessments in their communities. Reforestation is at the core of the project, preventing against the immediate problems of erosion and soil degradation as well making positive long-term contributions to carbon sequestration to mitigate effects of climate change.

Both Fair Trade USA and Fairtrade International responded to Latin America's coffee leaf rust crisis. Through its existing Cooperative Small Grants



Gabriela Sibrian Hueso, 17, checks coffee plants in the nursery at El Jabali Co-op in El Salvador.

Photo courtesy of Sean Hawkey

Program FT USA distributed over \$50,000 to producers, focusing on two co-ops in Peru. Through its Fairtrade Access Fund, Fairtrade International also devoted \$50,000 to leaf rust recovery. “We are turning our farms into more sustainable ones,” said Sonia Mercedes Vasquez, head of the technical department at COMSA, a Fairtrade cooperative in Honduras. “Our plants are much more resistant to this plague because they are better fed and because we are polluting the environment less.”

UTZ (Amsterdam)

UTZ is driven by the principle that sustainable farming can become the norm for coffee, tea and cocoa production. “Certification is not the end goal, but a tool to create change for the better,” said UTZ executive director, Han de Groot.

In January, UTZ released its first comprehensive impact report comparing UTZ certified farms to uncertified control farms through 24 studies: 16 on coffee, three on tea, and six on cocoa. The report analyzed the outcomes of UTZ certification over time in the context of the lives of 500,000 farmers and 400,000 workers in 34 producing countries.

More than 10,000 UTZ certified products are available in 116 consuming countries, 18 of which are also UTZ producing nations, meaning that in more than half of countries where UTZ products are produced they are also consumed, demonstrating UTZ’s drive to “make sustainability mainstream and not a niche. UTZ is for everybody,” said public relations officer, Mira-Bai Simon.

Looking Forward

This year UTZ will work with tea smallholders in Kenya and Malawi on women empowerment and improvements in yields. UTZ recognizes that one of the biggest challenges of certification is illiteracy, and that education must precede certification. Thus UTZ is working to tackle structural limitations to pursuing certification. UTZ will release a new Code of Conduct mid 2014. The revision process includes input from stakeholders and will emphasize the health impact of climate variability.

Currently, UTZ is part of the Coffee Climate Care (C3) project in Vietnam, a joint venture with the DE Foundation, which aims to increase the resilience of coffee production systems to climate change by identifying and implementing adaptation measures. It will run until 2016 and is funded by the Deutsche Investitions-und Entwicklungsgesellschaft (DEG) with public funds of the German Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ).

Along with other certifiers, UTZ is also part of the development of the new Carbon Footprint Product Category Rule for the assessment of greenhouse gas emissions from green coffee production.

4C Association (Geneva)

4C (Common Code for the Coffee Community) is a B2B verification system to ensure best practices through the supply chain and therefore does not have a logo visible to end consumers.

At the close of 2013, there were 256 licensed 4C units present in 21 coffee produc-

ing countries that had been independently verified against the principles of the 4C Code of Conduct, the entry-level sustainability standard for the coffee sector. Verified Units comprise more than 350,000 farmers and 1.1 million workers.

In the past year, 33 units have been licensed under the collaborative benchmarking scheme with the Rainforest Alliance. “The 4C Association and the Rainforest Alliance benchmarked their two systems back in 2008. This allows producer groups already certified under the Sustainable Agriculture Network (SAN) standard of the Rainforest Alliance to apply for the 4C license without going through the 4C verification process in addition. Not only are certified producer groups faced with fewer mandatory audits and a reduction in overall costs, but they can also enjoy an increase in market access through the 4C coffee supply chain,” said 4C communications manager Veronica Perez.

Since the 4C Code of Conduct is an entry-level standard, benchmarking with the Rainforest Alliance’s SAN standard is non-reciprocal; 4C license holders must apply to be certified according to the more stringent SAN standards in order to obtain the Rainforest Alliance Certificate. More producers are also transitioning from 4C to other certifications based on the success of the “stepping up” pilot project carried out in 2011 in El Salvador.

Looking Forward

The 4C Association is currently carrying out a benchmarking exercise with Certifica Minas Coffee (CMC), the standard for sustainability in coffee produc-

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tion from the Minas Gerais state in Brazil. The objective is to document the equivalences and differences between both systems. Results of the exercise will be announced during the first half of 2014 and will guide development to facilitate farmers who already have the CMC certificate in obtaining the 4C license.

“Additionally, the 4C Association is in dialogue with other standard setting schemes to explore possibilities for other benchmarking initiatives in the near future that could benefit farmers,” said Perez.

Rainforest Alliance (New York)

In July 2013, Rainforest Alliance released figures indicating the scope of their global reach and the ways in which they've contributed to the international growth of sustainable farming, protection of natural ecosystems, and increase in the sale of responsibly sourced coffees and teas.

In 2012, the area of Rainforest Alliance-certified farmland doubled, with over 5.4 million acres (2.2 million hectares) of land, and managed to curb

deforestation, conserve soil and water and protect wildlife. Rainforest Alliance (RA) certification impacted 11 million farmers, workers, their families and communities worldwide. The total volume of RA-certified coffee reached 4.5 percent of the global supply and RA-certified tea reached 11.5 percent. 450 new companies joined the now 3,400 that buy or sell products from RA-certified farms. Caribou Coffee became the US's first major coffeehouse to serve 100 percent RA-certified beans and Republic of Tea, Teatulia Organic Teas and Yogi Tea launched products with ingredients from RA-certified farms.

RA continues its partnership with Nestlé through the Nespresso AAA program. In Colombia, a third-party study found AAA verified farmers had 87.4 percent higher incomes than verified, as well as improved crop yields, land management, and an improvement in overall quality of life.

At the close of 2013, Rainforest Alliance announced that 200 RA-certi-

fied farms in Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador had successfully completed the Sustainable Agriculture Network Climate Module. “As a result of the project, these farmers are better prepared to deal with impacts of climate change, and recognize that their actions can have a tangible impact in addressing the problem,” said Mario Lopez, project coordinator for the Rainforest Alliance in Guatemala.

Looking Forward

Rainforest Alliance will continue its Cupping for Quality competition, which evaluates coffees coming from its certified farms around the world. The first results of the two 2014 competitions will be announced Friday, April 25th at the SCAA Expo in Seattle.

“We expect to see growth continue in 2014,” said Alex Morgan, senior manager of sustainable agriculture at the Rainforest Alliance. “Sustainable certification has become a part of the triple bottom line, with tea and coffee companies recognizing

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the value of Rainforest Alliance certification not only in supporting farming communities and protecting the environment, but also in ensuring the long term supply of key crops.”

Bird Friendly (Washington, D.C.)

The Bird Friendly coffee certification standards are outlined by the Smithsonian Migratory Bird Institute (SMBI) and view coffee farms as whole ecosystems that can provide habitats not only for a vast number of bird species, but also for mammals.

SMBI researcher Amanda Caudill, who is currently conducting a comparative study of wildlife in two systems of coffee production in Chiapas, Mexico, explained the Bird Friendly certification as requiring, “that the farm be organic and have a diverse shade tree structure. The farm we are working on seems like a forest habitat but with coffee planted as the understorey...the sun coffee [habitat] is mainly a swath of coffee plants with sparsely planted trees for shade. Our camera trap recorded a temperature of 110 degrees F.”



In April of 2013, Allegro Coffee (owned by Whole Foods, Inc., Austin, Texas) launched two coffees with Bird Friendly certification. One is a blend of a Nicaraguan and Mexican coffees called “Early Bird Blend,” the other is a single-origin coffee



Jardin Colombia: Receiving coffee cherries at Nespresso AAA wet mill in Jardin, Antioquia, Colombia.

Photo courtesy of Rachel Northrop

from estate farm Selva Negra in Matagalpa, Nicaragua.

Looking Forward

Researchers continue to study the environments created by the cultivation of Bird Friendly coffee, and roasters around the world continue to embrace the certification as an indication of ecosystem stability.

Owner Ben Roberts of roaster Beanpress Coffee of London said, “What convinced me to begin buying Bird Friendly coffees was when we received the first sample from a certified farm in Ethiopia. The coffee was so complex, unusual and great quality. I realized then that it is possible to grow coffee that ticks all the boxes in terms of quality, economic viability and environmental sustainability.”

Similarly, Andrew Knight, owner of London’s Andronicas Coffee, noted, “coffee by the cup is a sexy, emotive, energized product,” and the prices consumers are willing to pay per cup make it no problem to cover the premium costs of certified coffee, whereas, “selling it pack-

aged by the kilo [or pound], the premium has to be explained and justified.” Roasters know certifications add value to the final product, but for Knight it’s also personal. “Merits of certification are something you believe, customers believe and want to support.” To him, “Bird Friendly illustrates the thing from a much wider perspective.”

Certifications operate under an array of standards and offer different ways to connect with both consumers and farmers. The one quality all certifications share is that they illustrate—the chain of producing and commercializing coffee and tea—from a wide perspective, one which takes into account the fuller, more holistic, human, environmental and bottom dollar costs of doing business. ☕

Rachel Northrop is the author of “When Coffee Speaks: Stories from and of Latin American Coffeepeople,” a compilation of interviews with people working along the coffee production chain. Visit whencoffeespeaks.com for more information and to order copies of the book.

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