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SNAPSHOT

Female Farmer Beats Coffee-Leaf Rust, Saves Crops

Rust fungus is decimating Central American coffee crops, but project-supported farmers are beating the disease with improved agricultural practices.



Photo by Fintrac Inc.

María Hernández stands proudly in her roya-free farm. With healthy crops and higher yields, she expects to harvest 400 pounds of high-quality coffee this year.

“USAID-ACCESO has helped me...I have learned better ways to grow healthy plants.”

María Hernandez

–Coffee producer

Coffee producers in Central America are suffering widespread losses from “la roya” fungus. Also known as coffee-leaf rust, this fungus thrives on leaves and chokes off the source of nutrients for the coffee cherries. Affected trees produce fewer cherries, and the beans that are salvaged lose their flavor.

The International Coffee Organization estimates more than 50 percent of coffee-growing areas in Central America have been affected. In Honduras alone, \$230 million in losses can be attributed to the fungus, pushing rural farming families further into poverty.

Fortunately there are measures small-scale producers can take to beat and prevent this disease. In response to the outbreak, USAID-ACCESO began working with coffee producers in Lempira in November 2012 to introduce good agricultural practices that help reduce the pressure on their crops.

María Hernández, a former housemaid, had just returned to her small village of Santa Rosita when the project began offering trainings. She learned a variety of techniques she had never heard of, including soil analysis; soil liming to improve nutrient uptake; soil conservation; shade control; pruning to remove diseased leaves; weed control; and, options available for chemical control.

“USAID-ACCESO helped me; I feel we don’t do things ignorantly like we used to,” she said. “I have learned better ways to grow healthy plants.”

In her limited experience with coffee, María earned approximately \$150 from 0.25 hectares. She expects to harvest 400 pounds of coffee this December, earning her around \$415, or triple her previous income.

Her land is now completely free of coffee rust, guaranteeing future healthy production and ensuring her ability to obtain fair prices.

María’s success has motivated other local women to take their farming more seriously. “I explain how I do things to other women,” she said. “They are inspired to produce and follow project advice.”

Santa Rosita is one of the communities that will harvest high-quality coffee this year. Other project-supported communities in Lempira, Santa Bárbara, Copán, La Pazx, Intibuca and Octotepeque have also managed to reduce the roya problem by following USAID-ACCESO’s advice.

With her augmented financial situation, María plans to keep growing and investing in her coffee crops. She aspires to become one of the best coffee growers in her region to provide a better life for her family. She expressed no desire to return to the city to work as a maid.

USAID-ACCESO specialists continue working with small-scale coffee producers in rural communities, promoting basic and cultural coffee production practices that help prevent pests and diseases, increase yields and income, and contributes to food security for more than 15,000 coffee growing project household clients in western Honduras.