

Fruit project could accelerate scientific research "by decades"

An ambitious new project to record the experiences of thousands of smallholder farmers in Colombia to help establish optimum growing conditions for tropical fruits in the country, is to begin imminently, following an USD \$1.6m grant from [Asohofrucol](#) (the Association of Fruit and Vegetable Growers in Colombia).

The Site-Specific Agriculture based on Farmers Experiences (SSAFE) project aims to document the planting decisions of more than 2,000 Colombian fruit farmers, and collect detailed information including production constraints, soil properties, and yields. The initial focus of the three-year project will be on high-value fruits including lemon, mandarin, orange, mango, avocado, and plantain.



Scientific research to improve tropical fruit production is notoriously difficult as it can take up to five years for some plants to begin bearing fruit. It means small producers often face enormous risks in diversifying production, or responding to changes in market demand or growing conditions.

By encouraging farmers to share their experiences, the team will gather important information about crop suitability in different areas in a fraction of the time needed to achieve the same results under controlled conditions.

The project will be jointly led by CIAT and ASOHOFRUCOL, with support from Colombia's National Agricultural Research program, COPROICA.

The use of the latest GPS (Global positioning System) technology, together with specially-developed software to process the information, will help scientists to build-up a detailed picture of the production constraints and opportunities for fruit producers in very specific areas. It could help establish farmers' options for addressing future challenges, such as climate change adaptation – including the suitability of diversifying into alternative crops.

"It's fantastic that after six years in the making, we've received the approval," said CIAT's Andy Jarvis, leader of the institution's Decision and Policy Analysis (DAPA) program, [who also received the Ebbe Nielsen Award in 2009](#) for the innovative use of computer technology in biodiversity research.

"This is participatory research on a phenomenal scale - but it involves changing the way we think about farmers' fields. The project recognizes that every time a farmer plants a crop, it's an experiment. If we can compile information on hundreds of thousands of these experiments, we could accelerate the rate of scientific research by decades."

"This approach is actually as old as agriculture itself with farmers constantly experimenting, observing and innovating," he continued.

"What's new is the power of modern information technology to exploit this approach to the full. It's now feasible – and possible - to bring together and process those individual experiences."



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The CIAT team will take to the road in the coming weeks to begin the process of meeting farmers in all parts of Colombia, and recruiting them into the scheme.

"Colombia lags behind other countries in the fruit industry," continued Jarvis. "This is one way for the farmers themselves to contribute to the future success of a sector that has tremendous potential."

Stay tuned for more...

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