

Fair Trade USA produce imports have skyrocketed from the eight million pounds shipped to the U.S. in 2004, reaching 55 million pounds in the first half of 2012 alone. Distributors have caught on that these certifications improve brand perception with three in four consumers, and help farmer livelihoods too. At www.freshfruitportal.com we caught up with the organization's produce and floral business development manager Alexandria Coari, who shared some examples of what this booming category means for more than 1.2 million farmers and workers.



From Fair Trade USA's first forays into fresh produce with bananas the group is now involved with 20 fruits and vegetables, with plans to introduce four more in the second half of this year.

Coari was reluctant to reveal what they would be, highlighting the distinction consumers were making that all farmers worked hard and buying fair trade could make a difference for their lives.

"Now people recognize the logo as a way to go halfway around the world and help improve the lives of a farming family," Coari said.

"Customers are pressuring businesses to be more transparent, CSR (corporate social responsibility) reports are becoming more important, and people want to align their purchasing decisions with their own personal values.

"I think that trend is really starting to catch on right now, and businesses are starting to respond."

The impact comes from social premiums going to farmer groups who can decide how to use them through community development funds, as well as a guarantees around fair wages and prices, environmental protection and safe conditions.

She pointed out Fair Trade USA only opened its doors in 1998, compared to the European movement that began in the 1950s. While across the Atlantic around 80% of people know what fair trade is, in the U.S. the figure stands at just 34%.

"From the consumer side I think there's been a huge increase because of the number of people who are really starting to come around to sustainability, traceability in their supply chains and getting concerned about where their food's coming from and how its produced."

Click [here for a gallery of workers and projects in Colombia and Costa Rica](#), courtesy of Fair Trade USA.

Personal stories

Coari told the story of a Costa Rican pineapple worker called Isabel Fonseca, who along with her husband could not afford childcare for the couple's four kids while working at Finca Corsicana.

"They have to leave them at home a certain number of hours in the day, because the mom or dad goes to work in the morning, and they switch shifts but there's an overlap when they're both not alone in the house," Coari said.

"They have to leave their kids home during that time and one time one of their little boys burnt himself, had nobody to go to, and was just there by himself for a couple of hours."

The Finca Corsicana Fair Trade Committee has been saving its social premiums for many years with the goal of improving the childcare situation, as well as overall education.

"What this farm decided to do was save money so they could build a learning center with English classes too and daycare center. It's a huge project; it isn't complete yet, but they've broken ground, we've seen some of the construction, and we spoke with some of the female workers.

"One of the workers' names was Franciny Bonilla Vidaurre, who has three kids and is a single mother. She is super excited for this daycare center.

"She works at the packinghouse of the plant and will be able to leave her kids there, knowing that they're safe and she doesn't have to spend half of her salary paying a nanny or a neighbor to come watch the them."

Finca Corsicana supplies its fair trade pineapples to multinational Dole.

Coari also highlighted the positive impact of fair trade on a farm in the Colombian region of Urabá, which supplies bananas for Turbana.

"We have a farm in Colombia that has been in the system for seven years, and they decided with these premiums they were going to build an apartment complex with the help of the government and the organization - meaning the banana company - so they've built a beautiful apartment complex.

"People aren't living with dirt floors anymore, they have a lot more room for a family of four compared to when they had a one-room house before. You create a complex and create a

community, so people aren't strewn across the land, children aren't going over the street to see their friends, they're all together now, so it's a safety issue that's been resolved.

"Sanitation in terms of the living situation has been improved, so that's been a huge success as well."

Conventional fair trade versus 'conventional conventional'

Coari highlighted that 60% of fair trade produce imported into the U.S. was also organic, and the two do often go together.

However, she emphasizes that the remaining 40% that is 'conventional' has much more restrictions than 'conventional conventional' produce; in other words, produce that is not organic or fair trade.

"In the world of fair trade organics isn't necessarily a requirement in order to become fair trade certified, but we have a system where it's highly encouraged.

"Actually farmers get an additional premium for their product if they're certified organic. For example, we can't immediately force a farm if they've been using certain pesticides for a number of years, to go 100% organic because that would kill their crops.

"There has to be that transition phase, so what fair trade does is you have that long and short term plan in order to slowly eliminate a lot of those pesticides."

She said Fair Trade USA had this policy as it was healthier for workers, the products they grow and end consumers.

Coari added that even if a farm is fair trade certified, it doesn't necessarily sell 100% of its products as fair trade.

"It's not that once you become certified everything that comes out of your farm has to get the premium back."

Related story: [U.S.: fair trade produce imports buoyant in 2012](#)

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