

## Program for the National Interpretation of the RSPO Principles and Criteria in Colombia



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### KEYWORDS

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### Summary

The program for the national interpretation of the RSPO Principles and Criteria in Colombia consists of five phases, as follows: a description of the interpretation process; the results of the meeting and feedback workshops; the preparation of the National Interpretation document; identification of the support tools needed for the process, and future steps to be taken.



As facilitator of the process for the interpretation of the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO) Principles and Criteria, I represent Fedepalma, the von Humboldt Institute, the World Wildlife Foundation (WWF), the Ministry of Environment, Housing and Territorial Development, and all the institutions involved in the nationwide dissemination of the concept of sustainability from a social, environmental and economic perspective.

### National Interpretation

The purpose of the national interpretation of the RSPO Principles and Criteria is to provide specific compliance guidelines adapted to the actual situation in Colombia.



The importance of this process lies in the fact that, if the compliance with such protocols does manage to respond to the requirements of a socially aware market, it may become the palm oil industry's true commitment to the country, generating social and environmental benefits that serve as the driving force for the region's sustainable development. It is clear that countries and companies that do not enter into the interpretation of the P&C can be excluded from the international arena, because they will not be able to sell their raw materials and products, as the European Union has consumer guidelines which confine it to the purchase of RSPO certified products only.

We started this project in June of 2008 and we expect to complete it by the end of October. The first step was to create a subject matter expert team. Then, on July 7, we launched the initiative at the Ministry of Environment, Housing and Territorial Development. In attendance were 87 people, which is an indication of the growing interest in the RSPO in Colombia.

Later, we held a workshop of experts, followed by 4 regional workshops which allowed us to get sufficient first-hand feedback from the palm oil growing areas. We are now here at this event, which is undoubtedly the ideal venue to make the necessary adjustments to the national interpretation document.

## Socialization and feedback workshops

The subject matter expert workshop, held on August 13 at the San Andrés Golf Club in Bogota, produced a draft baseline document to be discussed by the regions. Fifty-four people, representing all aspects of the palm oil industry, participated in the drafting of this document. In fact, many of them work in palm oil production. A few of the other participants work in environmental activities, and some others are engaged in work in the social sphere.

This demonstrates that the efforts led by Fedepalma, in co-operation with the Ministry and other authorities, have helped raise environmental awareness in the country, which makes it easier to discuss social issues that frequently arise in this context.

It is important to explain that we used sets of criteria for each principle, accompanied by two or three ques-

tions, in order to have clarity on what was going to be measured, to identify existing gaps and to give recommendations on how to close those gaps.

The document drafted by the group of experts was discussed in each region. In some cases it was fully accepted and in some other cases suggestions were made in accordance to each region's specific conditions.

Every time the document was amended, the new version was uploaded to the webpage and sent to all workshop participants with the purpose of enabling an open online dialogue. Similarly, participants were asked to pass the updated versions on to other relevant people.

Regional workshops started on August 29, 2008 in Palmar de La Vizcaína, located in the Central Region of Colombia, close to Barrancabermeja. The first workshop was attended by 47 people, mostly producers, and a similar set-up was employed in the other events.

In the first meeting, the first impressions of the Colombian palm oil industry's reality began to emerge. There was a large participation by actors from civil society—the largest such participation from among all regions—who greatly contributed to the process. This was due to the strong presence of work cooperatives and associations from the region. These small producers organize themselves into cooperatives to work and to make palm oil a sustainable livelihood.

In the Northern Region, the workshop was held on September 5, at Gabriel García Marquez's House in Aracataca. The workshop was attended by 48 participants; once again mostly producers. Although social representation was slim, in attendance was the Daabon Group, which has made significant headway concerning RSPO proposals, and whose experience, together with all its certifications, have helped us assimilate and nurture the experts' preliminary draft proposal.

This meeting was repeated on September 12 in the Eastern Region, at the Villavicencio Club, with 56 participants. This workshop was attended, in addition to producers and representatives of social organizations, by members of the academic and research sectors.

Finally, on September 19, we worked in Tumaco, in the Western Region with 25 participants from all the sectors involved. It was interesting to see how this region

responded to the bud rot problem, and its rationale for applying Principles and Criteria under the extreme circumstances created by the disease.

Finally, an institutional social meeting attended by 40 participants was held on September 29 at the Agustín Codazzi Institute Auditorium in Bogota, to present a progress report and explain to the institutions what we had accomplished.

## Interpretation process results

Part of the interpretation process results reflect the way in which tasks were performed in each region; that is, by workgroups: one group focused on production, one focused on environmental issues and another one focused on social issues.

### Production Principles

Production principles are Principle 3, “Commitment to economic viability”; Principle 4, “best practices”; and Principle 8, “commitment to continuous improvement.”

**The fundamental aspects revolved around the implementation of production best practices that ensure environmental, social and economic sustainability.**

In Principle 3, the key aspects upon which the work was based were essentially aimed at having a business plan geared towards ensuring economic sustainability, with a clear understanding that, in the case of oil palm, we need to have a mid- and long-term vision, because of its particular production characteristics.

One of the participants’ main contributions to this production principle of commitment to economic viability is that all business decision-making processes must be based on up-to-date economic information, and that to achieve this, we need to have baseline studies of production processes that allow for technology transfer, research and training across the organization.

As for Principle 4, use of best practices, the fundamental aspects revolved around the implementation of production best practices that ensure environmental, social and economic sustainability; quality control systems (records and monitoring); good soil, water and agrochemical management practices, and integrated pest management, as well as the implementation of a health and safety program, and training for all the actors involved.

As a result, we build upon previous research efforts made in the country, particularly by Cenipalma.

A suggestion that was repeated throughout the workshops in the different regions was to use Cenipalma’s soil management guidelines, specifically by the Agronomic Management Units (AMU), and to consider adopting them throughout the country.

The workshops placed emphasis on the fact that the application of the criteria should be gradual and in accordance with the organization’s scale (from small, to medium to large producers). In that sense, we have to remember that this consideration is already included in the RSPO generic guidelines.

The concern for water issues was evident in all regions. The participants warned us of the need to conduct water balance studies for this production principle and insisted on the application of Cenipalma’s pest management and recording methodologies, the development of protocols for the technical and gradual use of agrochemicals and training for smallholders and contractors.

In relation to Principle 8, commitment to continuous improvement, the fundamental issue discussed was to implement this principle in various key operations concerning social, environmental and economic impacts and opportunities. The main contributions were based on the use of internal audits, together with an assessment of the personnel’s level of education and the socialization of technical innovations, as excellent tools with which to work and to put into practice this continuous improvement.

### Environmental Principles

There are basically two environmental principles: Principle 5, Environmental Responsibility, Conservation of



Natural Resources and Biodiversity, and Principle 7, Responsible Development of New Plantings. Concerning Principle 5, we discussed fundamental aspects such as identification and mitigation of potential environmental impacts; the care that should be taken with regard to high-value species and habitats, and waste management and use of waste for energy production, as well as the need to have a clear policy that prohibits the use of fire, and a pollution reduction policy that includes greenhouse gases.

Here, discussions revolved around the inclusion of hydro-biological characteristics, not only of forests but also of water resources and biodiversity, so as to have a better understanding of the impacts on those ecosystems. In this context, it would be worth revising the application of the environmental guidelines developed by Fedepalma in cooperation with the Ministry, to downscale it from regional to plantation scale, so that producers can learn how to implement these types of tools.

The workshops also discussed the importance of quantifying greenhouse gas emissions caused by biomass burning because, although there is a zero burning policy, burning is allowed under some extreme circumstances approved by the environmental authorities which, however, would make no sense since we are trying to prevent further impact on climate change. Therefore, the RSPO has drawn our attention to very important methodologies such as lifecycle measurements and energy balance.

The fundamental aspects of Principle 7 focused on a comprehensive, participatory and independent assessment of environmental and social impacts, before establishing new plantations. Therefore, planning is a very important aspect and must be done in accordance with the region's biophysical profile.

Another categorical imperative is not to replace high conservation value ecosystems. Undertaking new projects in a very diverse and ethnically rich country such as Colombia requires the full consent of the communities involved. In this context, the workshops suggested that any new development must be consulted with territorial planning. Colombia has well-defined planning instruments that, although they might be deficient in some cases (and will be revised), are a very useful reference point to start working within a social

and environmental sustainable strategy such as the one proposed by the RSPO.

The debate, then, revolved around the implementation of these agricultural management units proposed by Cenipalma, the adoption of the high conservation value HCV methodology at plantation level, the use of prior consultation mechanisms, and consensus-building processes with rural communities.

Criterion 7.6 created many problems in Colombia, because its final draft is in conflict with the Constitution. We will have to find a way not to discriminate against ethnic minorities. In the case of *campesino* communities, we could say that there is no problem, but the condition of nontransferable, unseizable and inalienable does not apply in a specific manner. We cannot give or take away rights in exchange for compensation, when the Constitution does not allow this to happen.

On the other hand, some workshop participants took the stand that fire should not be considered under any circumstances, because if a new plantation is established adequately, there should not be any extreme circumstances.

### Social Principles

As for social principles, it is important to remember the commitment to transparency (1), compliance with the laws (2), and responsibility towards growers and all the actors involved (6).

The fundamental aspects of Principle 1 state that the decisions taken by the different actors involved should be based on sufficient information and knowledge of the relevant environmental, social, administrative and economic aspects of the subject. This means

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that we must provide these actors with access to that knowledge and information; therefore, we need to have support mechanisms and protocols in place.

The main contributions were aimed at determining information delivery schedules and at applying various protocols to control and follow up the procedures mentioned above.

The mandatory nature of Principle 2, “Compliance with applicable laws and regulations”, is quite clear. The main subjects addressed were property rights –a key element in the country–, labor rights, cultural and plant health practices, and environmental regulations, amongst others.

Suggestions focused on the importance of having prior consultation support mechanisms when working with communities. One of the key contributions in this process was the need to include in all leasing agreements performance clauses that are in line with RSPO Principles and Criteria. If we get the land leaseholders to frame their actions within these principles, we could somehow ensure that the resource will not be exploited to exhaustion and thereby achieve sustainability, even though they, as leaseholders, may not feel a sense of belonging to the land.

Principle 6, “responsibility toward employees, individuals and communities,” is the most complex one. There are 11 criteria in connection with the communities and their decisions concerning labor, culture, communication, discrimination, agreements and local development issues, as well as the identification and mitigation of social impacts, the creation of informed and fair voluntary agreements, the attainment of decent working conditions, the right for communities to organize themselves into trade unions, etc.

The workshops also provided ideas on how to present a social balance of accounts, following the logic of a GRI methodology, which can be easily checked in the guideline sheet. They also made other proposals such as extending the social policies to include suppliers, hiring external process assessors, obtaining baseline demographic information, making clear that investing in social issues is the best policy for any business, considering food security issues, guaranteeing the stakeholders’ representation, promoting the hiring of local labor and promoting social development.

## Identification of support tools

It is clear that understanding a series of principles, criteria, indicators and guidelines is not enough. We also need to know how businesses can make this come true and how they can implement an easy-to-understand methodology. This identification of support tools led us to build a preliminary list based on which we started working.

The structure of the Colombian principles & criteria interpretation document is similar to that of Malaysia and Indonesia. The document establishes what is to be measured and the necessary indicators. The gaps, and the proposals to address them, became a complete set of implementation guidelines.

During this process, the following support tools were identified: a legal information system that can be easily developed and made available to all businesses; implementation of the RSPO certification as a requirement for loan approval, particularly for small producers; palm oil information systems; continuous improvement guidelines; environmental performance information systems; dissemination programs for best practice and environmental performance; development of a high conservation value tool, at plantation level; byproduct management guidelines; guidelines for efficient use of energy; land preparation guidelines; best practices guideline to reduce emissions; price information systems for small producers, etc.

These support tools can be extrapolated and used by other countries. In short, based on the work led by Fedepalma, in cooperation with WWF, the Alexander von Humboldt Institute, and the Ministry of Environment, Housing and Territorial Development, Colombia is developing Principles and Criteria that are in line with the national reality and that respond to the need to further improve the industry’s sustainability.

## Next steps

To continue making the necessary adjustments, in accordance with Principle 8 on continuous improvement, to the national interpretation document to be presented at the 6th Annual Roundtable Meeting of the RSPO (RT6) which will be held in November. We



are also working on the development of a regulatory Annex for all interpretation processes; that is, finding out what laws and regulations apply specifically to each principle and criteria, and whether there are conflicts between national and RSPO regulations.

Therefore, once the document is consolidated, we will have the final report that will be presented at the RT6 for RSPO approval, and next year we will begin developing support tools, and working on certification and continuous improvement processes.