

Grain, Legume Producers Want To Grow More Food in Colombia!

by Miriam Nelly Redondo, LaRouche Association of Colombia

As part of the Schiller Institute's continuing mobilization to double world food production, *EIR* discussed how Colombia could mobilize its agriculture potential to contribute to that great global endeavor with Dr. Napoleón Viveros, who heads Colombia's National Federation of Grain and Legume Producers (FENALCE). In a June 10 interview, Viveros made clear that until there are indications that farming can once again become a profitable venture in Colombia, and the government gives up its belief that subsidies are a sin, Colombia's farmers will be unable to supply either the domestic or export markets.

In other words, agriculture cannot be abandoned to market conditions.

Since the "economic opening"—the adoption of free trade policies—for agriculture by the Cesar Gaviria government in the early 1990s, food production in Colombia has been declining, at an accelerating rate. Inflation in the food sector in Colombia in the last 12 months reached 8.16%; food imports rose 10% in 2007, as compared to 2006; and the country now imports 8.5 million tons of food. However, a report issued on June 19 by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), documents that what *is* increasing, is production of coca, the primary ingredient of cocaine. That rose by 27% over last year (2007). Presently, Colombia is the top cocaine-exporting country to the United States and Europe.

Colombia's grain producers gathered in Bogota on June 19 for FENALCE'S XXI National Congress, during which they urged the government to extend land under cultivation in the country by 1 million hectares, out of the 20 million available for agriculture, in order to meet domestic demand. They pressed for corn, beans, wheat, sorghum, and soy—the sectors most harmed by the free trade policies of the 1990s—to be given priority. The grain producers specified that to make this policy work, the government must establish a protective floor for the farm sector, ensuring stability and protection from risks, and securing the interests of the small, medium, and large farmers through a policy document of the National Economic and Social Policy Council (Conpes), Colombia's highest national planning authority.

At present, the principal obstacles for expanding agriculture in Colombia are: the lack of infrastructure and of modern agricultural methods and technology; the high cost of transportation; the rise in the price of seeds; and the out-of-control increase, now 200%, in the cost of fertilizer.

Colombia's Food Deficiencies

EIR posed the global parameters of the food crisis to Viveros, the head of FENALCE, at the outset of the interview:

"Schiller Institute leader Helga Zepp-LaRouche has issued a call for doubling food production worldwide, and in discussions at the Food and Agriculture Organization held recently in Rome, Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak and others have issued similar calls. What could Colombia do to contribute to this, and how can we also domestically increase our food production to be able to generate an exportable surplus?"

Viveros answered: "From our standpoint as an agricultural association, we think that food production in Colombia, essentially, has been losing importance in the economy, because there are no signs of profitability which would enable producers to continue producing.

"A government policy needs to be formulated which provides farmers with tools....

"After the 'economic opening,' agricultural activity was dismantled; infrastructure was either cancelled or sold off. And today, although farmers may have a calling to farm, to turn them into producers again, entails starting up a business once again. And when I make the decision to get involved in a productive activity, doing simple calculations, it has to be a profitable productive activity, an activity which guarantees that I can recover my investment, and make a profit which is sufficiently attractive and consistent with the effort being made."

Vulnerable in Corn and Wheat

If government policies which promote food production are not adopted, the current situation of shortages may worsen, as is already happening with cereals. In this regard, Viveros reported that Colombia imports 60% of its corn. "We are very deficient in corn. We import annually 3.3 million tons, between white and yellow corn, with yellow corn being much more important in terms of the volume imported; 3.2 million tons of yellow corn are imported, and 100,000 tons of white corn."

"We are very vulnerable," Viveros said. "We are greatly concerned that the agricultural areas which are increasing in the country, are not increasing for food production. Many of the areas where corn could be produced, under more efficient conditions and at relatively lower cost—such as the Magdalena Medio valley or certain areas of the Atlantic Coast—are being turned over to agricultural production, but not to corn production, which could be one of the important bastions in those areas. Areas dedicated to African palm are increasing. Planting sugar cane to produce ethanol is under consideration. Commercial crops and crops dedicated to energy production

are what are replacing food crops.”

Viveros added: “With regard to wheat, we indeed have a great vulnerability. Today, we are importing more than 1.2 million tons of wheat, and our national production is some 45,000 tons of wheat. Looking at 2007 imports, 350,000 tons of soft wheat were imported, out of the 1.2 million total. We could grow up to 350,000 tons.”

EIR asked: “And if there is an international shortage, how could we supply ourselves, because we are really talking about our daily bread here?”

Viveros then discussed the problem that Colombia’s bread and baking industry uses more hard wheat, which is not grown in Colombia; we grow the soft wheat, which is not used as much. But, in his view, “national wheat can be used. There will need to be a cultural change in wheat consumption, or rather, in bread consumption. We are not going to be able to sell the spongy white breads. . . . We could say that the cheap imports have generated a cultural change in the country, and now it is going to be difficult to change. But we are certain that if shortage is the problem, then people are going to have to change their habits of consumption.”

Wheat cultivation could be expanded in the inter-Andean valleys, in the Cundinamarca-Boyaca and Narino high plateaus, by perhaps as much as 70,000 to 80,000 hectares, he reported, but the rains in these areas are insufficient to increase cultivation more than that.

Opening the Eastern Plains

Land under cultivation can be greatly expanded by opening up the *altillanura* (high plains) and the Orinoquí region. The latter is a 310,000 square kilometer area almost the size of Germany, 23% of the national territory, which includes the departments of Vichada, Arauca, Casanare, Guania Guaviare, and Vaupés.

The principal obstacle in utilizing this area, is the lack of transportation infrastructure. An electrified railroad would be needed, crossing the entire region, so that harvests could be transported to the areas of greatest consumption. Currently, there is a highway which reaches as far as Puerto López, in the adjacent department of Meta, and a road which is in the process of being paved, which extends from that city to Puerto Gaitan, Meta. After that, there are only narrow paths where it is impossible to go more than 12 miles an hour, and in the rainy season, the region floods and becomes a lake.

As regards the potential of the eastern plains for expanding land under cultivation, Viveros pointed out that “the Colombian *altillanura*” [is] the area in which it is possible to increase corn and soy production in Colombia. We consider it an excellent option, but we think that not everyone can go there, because it is an area where it is necessary to make the greatest capital investment needs, where you really have to have infrastructure. It is not just the preparation of the soil, which today is not suitable, but which could be made so with important investments of 1.5 million pesos per hectares, or a little more. It could be transformed, but it is where the trans-

formation costs the most to carry out.”

“The *altillanura* has a lot of potential; investments are very high, the equipment required is very specific, because the necessary corrective chemicals must be added to the soil. The soil of the *altillanura* has an excellent structure. It would provide good support for a good crop, but it has a problem called aluminum. The soils have up to 90% aluminum saturation. Aluminum is toxic for plants. This is the reason that they are savannahs, with absolutely no kind of vegetation other than grassy plants, which have been able to adapt.

“To make the soil productive, the effect of the aluminum must be neutralized with lime. The amount of lime which must be applied ranges between three and five tons per hectare. And the lime has to be mixed into the soil, which requires the proper machinery.

“It is being done. There are two or three such projects under way. Today, there may be some 5,000, 6,000 hectares which are being transformed. Investors coming into the country are thinking along these lines.

“Something very similar was done in the Brazilian Cerrado. They took acid soil, under conditions very similar to the Colombian *altillanura*, and transformed that soil, and thanks to that, they are able to carry out agriculture there.”

Colombia has all the potential to be food self-sufficient and a food pantry for the world. But to do this, Viveros emphasized: “the government must decide that the country’s priority is to produce food. And initially, it must establish a cost for that effort and that priority. Once we have the government policy for achieving this well planned out, things will move. Because growers are awaiting clear signals to begin making investments in the land.”

What Must Be Done

As is being recognized around the world, biofuels are a crime against humanity. A recent UNICEF study reports that three children under five years of age die daily in Colombia for lack of food. There are 21 deaths from malnutrition (directly, or from related causes) for every 100,000 inhabitants. Of every 100,000 children born live, 252 die a year from malnutrition before they reach five years old.

Colombia urgently needs to take economic emergency measures to prevent free trade and globalization from continuing to destroy production and cause genocide. Here are some of the policies which must be put into effect immediately:

1. Establish food self-sufficiency as a priority.
2. Credit, at an interest rate of 1-2% and long-term, is needed to encourage basic production sectors.
3. Parity prices must be set, to prevent farmers from going bankrupt.
4. A great infrastructure-project building program must be carried out: rail corridors, dams for management of water, irrigation districts, canals, and so on.
5. Biofuel production must be eliminated immediately. Colombia must begin constructing nuclear plants to generate electricity and industrial heat.