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IICA contributes to the formulation of a strategy for trade in organic products in Central America

During the 1990s, international trade in organic products grew at rates ranging from 20% and 30% per year. Sales of such products on international markets were estimated to be worth some US\$20 billion in 2000, with agricultural products accounting for between 2% and 3% of transactions involving conventional products.

The organic products placed on the market range from fresh plant and animal-based products to a wide variety of agroindustrial and industrial products, such as: wine, spirits, sausage, cheese, dairy products, noodles, jellies, pickles, sauces, snacks, cookies and chocolate, as well as a number of cosmetic and pharmacological products, and clothing, such as shoes, belts, cotton garments, and sweaters made from the wool of organically reared sheep and alpacas, to mention a few.

Thanks to the rapid growth of the international market for organic products, to the difference between the prices of such products and those of conventional products (more than 100% in some cases), and to greater mastery of relevant production techniques, organic production is now a profitable activity, and is becoming more attractive to investors and others in the financial sector interested in funding this activity.

In addition to the obvious financial and commercial rewards, organic production generates social benefits, such as improved health for producers and consumers; protection of the environment; and generation of jobs. As a result, many decision makers in the agricultural sector now view organic production as a viable alternative, given the obsolescence of the technology-production model promoted in recent decades.

In Central America, the ministers of agriculture have gone one step further, instructing the Inter-American Institute for Cooperation on Agriculture (IICA) to promote the project Fostering Organic Production and the Development of Markets in Central America, the goal of which is to establish the structural conditions needed in the region for this activity to grow even more rapidly. The project is divided into three components: establishment of a legal and technical-regulatory framework, to govern organic production; establishment of an institutional and policy framework, to promote the activity; and development of markets, to ensure its sustainability.

As part of the last component, the IICA Cooperation Agency in Costa Rica, which is responsible for overseeing the project, will hold a seminar-workshop for representatives of the Central American countries. The purpose of the event will be to pave the way for the formulation of a regional strategy for trade in organic products, which, in turn, will constitute an important input of the project component in question. In addition to providing a forum for exchanges among those involved in the trade in organic products, this activity will furnish participants with ideas they can use in formulating trade strategies or improving those already in place, or to build into their national policies.

The seminar-workshop will be held from April 24-27 at IICA Headquarters in San Jose, Costa Rica. The event will consist of a number of activities and presentations, including: the presentation of an IICA study on the production of, and trade in, organic products in Central America today; an analysis of the ways to access the principal markets for organic products (European Union, United States, Japan); the presentation of successful experiences in exporting such products and developing local markets; the development of markets from the perspective of consumers; and opportunities to speak with representatives of the principal supermarket chains in the region.

For further information, please contact the organizers of the event, at the following e-mail address: organicos@ica.ac.cr or visit our webpage <http://www.icanet.org/accr/organicos>