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World - AP Latin America

Fair Trade Rules Sought for Church Palm

Mon Sep 8, 3:29 PM ET

By NAOMI KOPPEL, Associated Press Writer

CANCUN, Mexico - Church groups, Latin American farmers and government officials met Monday to try to ensure fair and environmentally friendly trade in the palm fronds that adorn Christian religious ceremonies every Easter.



AP Photo

[Slideshow: World Trade Organization](#)

Participants at the session, held amid preparations for the World Trade Organization (news - web sites) ministerial meeting that starts Wednesday in Cancun, discussed the creation of a certification system for the Chamaedorea palm, native to Mexico and Guatemala.

Over the Easter period each year, 45 million palm fronds — worth \$4.5 million — are bought in North America alone for religious ceremonies, said Chantal Line Carpentier of the Commission for Environmental Cooperation, a watchdog agency created under the North American Free Trade Agreement.

The CEC, which assesses the environmental impact of NAFTA, hopes a certification system would alert consumers in the United States and elsewhere that palms have been produced according to environmental and fair trade standards.

The system would be voluntary, with neither NAFTA nor the WTO empowered to enforce it.

With global trade criticized for ignoring the impact on impoverished countries that provide natural resources, devising a plan for sustainable trade of a wildlife species — in this case the palm plants found under forest canopy — could be a model for the future, proponents say.

"Trade can be good if you design it the right way," Carpentier said. "We want to show that trade can be green, and trade can be good for the environment."

She said producers told Monday's meeting that they need to get a price that covers their efforts, while importers stress that producers must demand a price that is driven by the market.

Carpentier said the goal is to create a system that properly compensates the harvesters of the palms — usually poor peasant farmers living near forest canopy where the plants grow — while preventing too much harvesting that diminishes the species.

Palm gatherers now get about \$1.20 for 144 leaves, Carpentier said, while in the United States, that same \$1.20 buys only a dozen leaves.

The certification would mean participating producers, transporters and retailers sign on to a program that gets money back to the harvesters while ensuring the harvest was sustainable.

Carpentier said certification would at least double the current 10-cent price for a palm frond. When the commission surveyed church groups about paying more for certified fronds, the response was overwhelmingly supportive, she said.

"Our lives should not be based on the suffering of others," said Sarah Ford of Lutheran World Relief's Interfaith Fair Trade Initiative, based in Baltimore.

Ford said the challenge would be "to educate churches and individual consumers that a fairly traded option exists."

"To get the palms certified ... would fit nicely into church concerns for workers' rights, economic justice" and other social and environmental issues, Ford said.

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Carpentier said both the United States and Europe offer potential markets for certified palms. The European flower industry already offers certified products.

Others involved in Monday's meeting include Fondo Accion and Instituto para el Desarrollo Sustentable en MesoAmerica of Mexico, the Rainforest Alliance and other environmental groups, government agencies, development programs and academics.

Associated Press reporter Tom Cohen in Toronto contributed to this story.

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Commission for Environmental Cooperation at www.cec.org

World Trade Organization at www.wto.org

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