The Farmer to Farmer project in Colombia is funded by Volunteers for Economic Growth Alliance (VEGA) and is being implemented by Purdue University’s International Programs in Agriculture to respond to the needs of smallholder farmers for technical assistance and support, including production, processing, farmer organization capacity building, and market linkages. The project will be implemented in the Department of Meta, which is one of the departments of the Orinoco watershed. Specifically, Purdue intends to focus on the Altillanura and the Ariari zone of the Piedemonte region.

Orinoquia region of Colombia covers 310,000 square kilometers to the north of the country’s Amazon jungle, stretching from the eastern range of the Andes Mountains to the Venezuelan border. It encompasses seven departments: Arauca, Meta, Casanare, Vichada, Guainía and Guaviare and has a population of 1.1 million people. This area, for decades dominated by extensive cattle ranching and low-input agriculture, is renowned for its fragile, ecologically diverse landscapes of wetlands, grasslands and forests that are home to 46 protected indigenous groups. Yet today it faces major challenges amid a surge in new development driven by both public and private investment, including new infrastructure, oil extraction and industrial-scale agriculture. How the development process is managed will determine whether the region becomes a model for sound development or a lesson in ecological collapse. At the same time, this region is the center of hopes for peace from negotiations between the Colombian Government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC). The talks focus on ending the use of violence to meet political objectives, and this could lead to a return of displaced peasants who were driven from their land during the 50 years of conflict. Rural development is key to the success of these efforts, in order to ensure a balance between small farms that use sustainable agricultural practices, and large agro industries that may not. This focus also addresses the inequitable distribution of land that is seen as one of the root causes of the conflict.

The economic development strategy for the Orinoco watershed, of which Meta is a part, identifies the need for an inclusive approach to the rural development of this region, and yet smallholder farmers’ associations have not been targeted for the support and technical assistance they so desperately require to increase sustainable productivity and profitability of their farm activities. In order to promote sustainable economic development in this region, it is necessary to provide support for smallholder farmers, and to promote a sustainable approach to the intensive use of its fragile lands.

Purdue Cooperative Extension promotes a small farms/regional food hubs strategy for rural development in Indiana. Such a strategy based as it is on valuing and investing in smallholder farmers is exactly what is required to support the sustainable and peaceful development of Meta. In a small farms and regional food hub approach:

- Growers are treated as strategic partners instead of input suppliers
- Food hub members are able to provide increased volumes and reduced transaction costs through aggregation.
- Products are differentiated by values and local branding (often with the identity and story of the people producing them).
- Rewards and responsibilities are distributed equitably across the supply chain

During this three-year program, 40 volunteer assignments will strengthen small farms and promote a small farms and regional food hub approach to improve productivity, access to markets and increased incomes for small holders, and access to local foods and increased economic development for the Department. The project will provide volunteer technical assistance to smallholder farmers, and also field volunteers to work with Universidad de los Llanos (Unillanos) and their respective host partners to facilitate institutional conditions, business models and governance mechanisms with which small scale farmers can function in a system that fully recognizes and values the roles of farms and farming systems at different scale levels. By adopting sustainable agricultural practices, smallholders can help to catalyze a rural development that responds simultaneously to poverty reduction; food security; economic development; and ecosystem

1 http://ciatblogs.cgiar.org/soils/ecosystem-signposts-in-orinoquia/  
services agendas. Purdue and Unillanos’ objectives focus at three levels to strengthen small farms and local food systems in Meta:

**Objective 1, Farm productivity to increase yields:** Improved agricultural productivity through sustainable agricultural practices and natural resource management. Volunteers will work with smallholder farmers so that they understand and are able to train others.

**Objective 2, Processing and Markets:** Strengthened regional agricultural economy through value-added processing and sustainable innovations along the value chain. Volunteers will provide technical assistance in agricultural processing, product innovation, and marketing

**Objective 3, Enhanced Networks:** New and strengthened networks support small farms and markets for local food systems

**Our Implementing partner** is the *University of Los Llanos*, which has for seven years been involved in promoting environmentally sustainable development of agricultural activities in Orinoquia, through ongoing activities and projects such as Tropical Production Systems; the Fourth Peace Laboratory of Meta (Laboratorio de Paz del Meta) and with Horizon Green Foundation Institutional Strengthening and Policy to Increase the Biodiversity Conservation in private land of Colombia. Unillanos developed a comprehensive sustainable use of oil palm products in animal nutrition has been developed, demonstrating that it is possible to feed animals without using cereals under tropical conditions.

Unillanos will work with host organizations to ensure the more important smallholder development and environmental issues are addressed through volunteer assignments. Unillanos will provide in-country logistical and security support to the volunteers, and will ensure follow-on technical support to farmers and farmers’ groups, supported by Purdue volunteers after they complete their in-country assignments. Finally, Unillanos will provide opportunities for graduate and doctoral students to undertake research in support of the project objectives and learning questions.

**Our collaborative partners are:**

*Asorinoquia* is an association of 21 Colombian agribusinesses and infrastructure enterprises that operate in Orinoquia. Asorinoquia seeks to promote regional development, with an emphasis on equity in the sustainable development of the region. Asorinoquia is not included in the budget, but has committed to working with the proposed project as a strategic partner to help link smallholder farmers with larger enterprises for their mutual benefit, and the equitable development of the regional economy.

*The Center for International Tropical Agriculture (CIAT)* has entered into a new strategic alliance with Colombia’s *Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (MADR)* and the *Colombian Corporation of Agricultural Research (CORPOICA)*. The alliance aims to place the development of Colombia’s vast savanna region, often referred to as Orinoquia or the Eastern Plains, on a more competitive and sustainable basis. Toward this end, CIAT researchers and their Colombian partners are working in four areas: (1) strategies for eco-efficient land use, (2) improved agricultural production systems, and (3) technology transfer.

**Volunteering in Meta, Colombia**

Volunteer assignments cover all expenses, including per diem, but do not cover salary. Purdue extension educators’ international volunteer time is considered professional development and is covered by their district directors as such. Other volunteers (from Purdue, from other institutions, or from among the general population) will need to understand that these are volunteer assignments.

Purdue and the University of Los Llanos develop Scopes of Work for volunteer assignments, based on needs identified by farmer associations, individual farmers, and others. For this project, these assignments will comprise training workshops, hands-on demonstrations, and other means of technical assistance in *agricultural production methods; control of pests and diseases; soil productivity; water resources management; horticultural issues; post-harvest handling, storage and processing, including sanitation procedures; market linkages; entrepreneurship; organizational capacity; permaculture; regional food hub strategies; etc.* Scopes of work detail all tasks to be conducted in the assignment, the number of days (usually two weeks), and the deliverables (such as the end of assignment report with recommendations).
We count on professionals with substantial experience in these areas. Once a suitable candidate has been identified, and has accepted the assignment, Purdue makes travel arrangements, and provides orientation. The University of Los Llanos ensures that the volunteer is met at the airport, brought to the hotel, picked up in the morning and driven to Villavicencio, Meta. There s/he will be met by our partner’s project coordinators and will review and finalize the tasks for the assignment. The volunteer will be accompanied in Meta at all times by at least one project coordinator, and an interpreter if needed. Once the assignment is concluded, volunteers are expected to complete a short end of assignment report before leaving the assignment region, and to write a blog (with photos) about their experience. The volunteer is then driven back to a hotel in Bogota, and driven to the airport the next morning.

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