

Examples of Failure: COSURCA Coffee Hit Again by U.S.-Backed Fumigation While Coca Production in Colombia Remains Steady

A Witness for Peace Report, May 2007

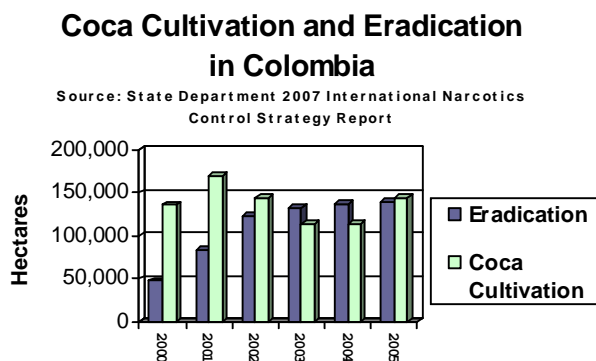
Principle Findings

- *Despite over \$5 billion and approximately two million acres fumigated in Colombia, the State Department reports increased coca production—the raw material for cocaine—during Plan Colombia’s seven years.*
- *U.S.-backed fumigation has destroyed legitimate crops. In a representative example of a widespread problem, for the second time in two years a coffee producers’ cooperative, COSURCA, has been wrongly fumigated.*
- *The evidence is clear—the fumigation policy has failed and must be discontinued. The program has failed to accomplish its stated goal of reducing coca production and has destroyed the livelihoods of family farmers.*

Coca Production in Colombia Unaffected by Fumigation Policy

Since 2000, the U.S. has invested \$5.4 billion in Plan Colombia in a failed attempt to reduce cocaine consumption in the United States. When Plan Colombia was launched, government officials pledged that their fumigation strategy would lead to a 50% decrease in coca cultivation—the raw material for cocaine—in five years and thereby reduce cocaine availability in the United States. The eradication program’s principle tool has been the aerial fumigation of coca crops using crop dusters and a broad-spectrum herbicide, called glyphosate. Experts have suggested that if cocaine availability were on the decline, the market price would rise and purity would deteriorate, thus reducing cocaine usage. None of this has come to pass according to government and non-governmental statistics.¹ A 2007 Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP) report showed that cocaine’s price per gram in the U.S. actually dropped while its street purity increased, once again showing that the aerial fumigation strategy is an expensive and ineffective policy.²

According to State Department figures, despite this billion dollar investment by U.S. taxpayers, coca production is higher now than as it was when Plan Colombia began³ (see graph). According to an analysis by the Center for International Policy based on U.S. government data, there was a 62% increase in attempted cultivation, and a 72% increase in the amount of territory dedicated to coca cultivation between 2000 and 2005, despite the fumigation of nearly 2 million acres.⁴



COSURCA Coffee Coop Fumigated Again

Not only has the fumigation strategy been unable to reduce coca production in Colombia,

it is also harming non-coca farmers and model alternative development programs—examples that family farmers can be successful in rural Colombia and leave coca production behind. The most recent alarming case is that of COSURCA, the Cooperative Association of Southern Cauca. COSURCA is a coffee cooperative founded as an alternative development project that has received funding from USAID, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), and the Government of Colombia. Despite being applauded as a model coca eradication and alternative development project, COSURCA farmers have been targeted by two rounds of fumigations in less than two years.

COSURCA was formed in southern Colombia in 1993 to promote organic and fair trade coffee as a way for small-scale farmers to leave coca behind and improve their livelihoods by producing high-quality coffee for export. According to COSURCA, the cooperative provides over 1,600 families with an alternative to illicit crops—families that eradicated over 40,000 coca plants in 2006 alone. Yet rather than being rewarded for their manual eradication and alternative development programs, which further U.S. stated policy goals, COSURCA members have become unduly targeted by the fumigation program. COSURCA reports that in May and June of 2005, 57 COSURCA-affiliated farms were fumigated by the U.S.-backed eradication program. Shockingly, despite the attention that erroneous fumigation received, including a congressional briefing in 2006 and a U.S. Embassy investigation, COSURCA recently reported and a Witness for Peace field visit confirmed that between January and March of this year another 30 COSURCA family farms were fumigated. COSURCA indicates that while ten percent of the farms fumigated in 2005 had coca, not a single farm fumigated in 2007 had coca. Many of the affected farmers have lost or are at risk of losing their organic certification due to the fumigations and therefore access to the higher premiums for their coffee.



Damaged COSURCA coffee hit by US-backed fumigation

“I Am Completely Outraged”

“We don’t have any alternative; we are lost,” commented Raul Ramirez⁵ as he stood near his house in Patia, Cauca looking at his coffee that was sprayed with glyphosate. Mr. Ramirez decided to turn to coffee and leave behind coca production thanks to a COSURCA eradication program. “It makes one think very badly of the government for doing this to us,” added Mr. Ramirez’s neighbor.

Aerial fumigations undermine COSURCA’s achievements and their efforts to reduce rural poverty and end illicit crop cultivation. According to COSURCA, aerial fumigation is “counter-productive to coca eradication in Cauca...Long-term successful eradication efforts require support for farmers through alternative development programs that help farmers to displace coca and other illicit crops with legal and profitable alternatives.”⁶ The fumigations have led to a widespread pessimism among COSURCA

coffee producers. Many of them took the leap of faith to leave behind illicit crop cultivation in hopes of finding another crop that brings them a living wage. Those gains are now in jeopardy, as many have lost those licit crops due to the fumigations.



A COSURCA coffee farmer holds up drying coffee beans.

“We’ve been abandoned,” said Ramon Gutierrez, also a member of COSURCA whose coffee and food crops were affected by the fumigations, referring to the lack of government outreach and infrastructure in this rural area. “And the response we get is fumigations. I am completely outraged. Now I have to seek out another way to make a living.” During this last round of fumigations Mr. Gutierrez’s food crops were severely damaged.

“Due to this (fumigation) we are going to face problems and we’ll go hungry,” he said.

Erroneous Fumigation Widespread

The fumigations of COSURCA farms are not exceptions to the rule but rather common examples of an expensive and failed policy to stop coca production in Colombia. Many family farmers in rural Colombia have sought to eradicate their coca crops and turn to other crops, either through alternative development programs or of their own initiative. Of these farms, an alarming number have been fumigated during or after their transition.⁷ In fact while the U.S. Embassy in Colombia points to a program to compensate non-coca farmers targeted by the fumigation program, in reality this program is unable to address the problem. According to the State Department, of 6,449 complaints received by the compensation program between late 2001 and September 2006, only 33 have received even minimal compensation.⁸ Therefore many farmers, including COSURCA, have now decided not to even initiate the lengthy and complicated complaint process



One of the few Colombian farmers to receive compensation for wrongful fumigation displays damaged peanut crops.

In addition, scientific studies suggest that fumigations cause various health problems and harm the environment.⁹ Paul Hunt, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Health, traveled to the Colombia-Ecuador border region in May upon the request of both governments to study the health effects of fumigation. Indicating that there is “credible, reliable evidence that the aerial spraying of glyphosate along the Colombia-Ecuador border damages the physical health” of the local population, Mr. Hunt recommended the immediate cessation of the program along the border until further studies can be conducted.¹⁰

Alternative Development Needed

Statistics show that when family farmers are fumigated instead of having a voluntary manual eradication effort coupled with viable alternative development and infrastructure programs, they often return to coca production. Many times these farmers move in to new areas, including virgin forests and national parks. Without viable alternative development programs designed in conjunction with the local community, family farmers often have to choose between extreme poverty and coca production. Most family farmers in rural Colombia do not have access to viable economic alternatives to planting coca. A small-scale coca farmer in Colombia receives an average annual income of approximately \$7,000 from their production.¹¹ Experts suggest that non-coca farmers’ annual income is up to 50% lower than that of coca farmers. Local food crops, while valuable and essential to ensuring rural food security, in many cases do not represent a viable source of income that can replace coca production without government support programs.

Farmers like the COSURCA members recently fumigated are left without a stable source of income and become vulnerable to recruitment from illegal armed groups. In interviews with Witness for Peace in early March, many farmers expressed concerns that their food crops were damaged and that their families would have to go hungry. “(After the fumigations,) insurgent groups come here and I can’t help but consider joining up,” said one farmer.

Recommendations:

After seven years and billions in taxpayer dollars it is clear that Plan Colombia's fumigation strategy has failed to achieve the goals set out for the program. It is time to use U.S. tax dollars more effectively. As policymakers consider further assistance to Colombia, Members of Congress should:

- Immediately end the fumigation strategy and employ other mechanisms for dealing with the drug crisis in the U.S. By all measures the fumigation program has failed. It has been unable to reduce coca production and has damaged or destroyed alternative crops, such as those of COSURCA.
- Insist on an integral eradication strategy in Colombia based on voluntary manual eradication coupled with a proven alternative development program and infrastructure projects. These programs must include 1) increased voluntary manual eradication and 2) a focus on strengthening civilian governance in rural areas by increasing investment in education, public health, agricultural extension, micro credit and other state services. Any such program must be designed in conjunction with local communities to ensure its viability and effectiveness.
- Make trade policy consistent with a sustainable drug policy. Any free trade agreement must protect Colombian family farmers from market pressures that could weaken the small-scale agricultural sector and push farmers to coca cultivation, such as the flooding of local markets by U.S. subsidized agricultural products.
- Reduce demand for drugs in the U.S. through evidence-based prevention strategies and improved access to high-quality treatment. Treatment has proven to be the only effective strategy to combat drugs. Policymakers must increase federal funding for drug treatment programs in order to meet the needs of those seeking treatment.

¹ See the Washington Office on Latin America report "Connecting the Dots, ONDCPs (Reluctant) Update on Cocaine Prices and Purity", April 23, 2007.

² Ibid.

³ The State Department's International Narcotics Control Strategy Reports' figures show that while there were an estimated 136,200 hectares of coca cultivation in 2000, the year Plan Colombia began, in 2005 (the most recent statistics released by the State Department) there were an estimated 144,000 hectares.

⁴ Center for International Policy, "Coca Cultivation in 2005", April 15, 2006.

⁵ Names have been changed to protect the farmers cited in this report.

⁶ Source: Aerial Fumigations of Illicit Crops: A Case Study, by COSURCA, September 13, 2005

⁷ Witness for Peace, "Deadly Fumigations Return to Putumayo", November, 2001.

⁸ United States Department of State 2007 International Narcotics Control Strategy Report.

⁹ Jim Oldham and Rachel Massey, "Health and Environmental Effects of Herbicide Spray Campaigns in Colombia," May 18, 2002.

¹⁰ Press release of Mr. Paul Hunt, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Health, accessed on May 24, 2007 at <http://www.nieuwsbank.nl/en/2007/05/23/r015.htm>.

¹¹ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, "Colombia Coca Cultivation Survey 2005", June 2006 and interview with Ricardo Vargas, drug policy expert, Bogotá, Colombia, May 2007.