



## ON ORGANIC CERTIFICATION

**Q.**

There have long been rumors of coffees, particularly in Africa, that are grown with organic farming practices (no pesticides, herbicides, or fungicides) but cannot be sold as Certified Organic coffee due to lack of the actual certification, presumably for reasons of cost. How does Intelligentsia define and assure "healthy environmental practices" in the absence of a certification?

*Ellie H., June 15, 2007*

**A.**

It is most definitely true that there is a lot of coffee grown in situations where zero chemical fertilizer, fungicide, herbicide, or pesticides are applied but where the coffee carries no certification of any kind. Most of the time these are "organic by default" coffees where the farmer cannot access or afford chemicals, so it's not a choice to be organic, just simple necessity. The farms that fit this description usually fall into the category of "non-managed farm", meaning that the farmers do not give much input at all to the trees and simply collect cherries when they appear.

There is cause for much debate, however, about organic certification in situations where farmers are actively cultivating the land and can theoretically access and afford either chemical fertilizer or certification. Is transitioning to fully certified organic a good decision? Let's look at both the environmental and economic impact...

What is the difference between a well-managed coffee farm that uses fertilizer and practices either zero or very limited, highly discriminate pest/disease control and that of a fully organic farm? Bear in mind that when we look at the reasons for organic farming, number one is to preserve the health of the ecosystem (flora, fauna, insect and wildlife, water purity) on the farm itself. Along these same lines, protecting farm workers from exposure to pesticides or chemicals is critical. Both of these goals can be accomplished on a farm that uses inorganic fertilizer. The key is to take a disciplined approach and practice what is called "nutrient budgeting"—using only what is really necessary and monitoring soil health annually.

Nearly every agronomist I've discussed this with has felt that coffee farms that practice "responsible methods" (i.e., approved types of applications, used minimally and with precision, along with full tracking/record keeping) for husbandry and plant management are perfectly sound from an environmental perspective. It is important to realize that coffee is a bit different than most crops that attract attention in the organic world in that it is normally grown at high elevation and is perennial. The cool mountain climates naturally reduce the need for pest or disease control, and the extensive root systems of the coffee trees help with soil integrity. Much of the coffee in these environments is grown under shade that delivers organic mulch to the soil and can actively fix nitrogen.

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Our partners at Finca Malacara are a good example to look at. They are careful environmental stewards, but they have made the decision that they cannot support the farm's development, including all the social programs they run (on-the-farm daycare for children of workers, a health clinic, and a full-time school) unless they produce enough coffee to have an efficiency of scale amidst quickly rising labor costs. Going organic would dramatically reduce their income and ability to support the workers, at least in the short term. And if their environmental footprint is controlled and sustainable in nature, motivation to move to fully organic practices is minimal to non-existent.

Our biggest priority right now under the environmental header of Direct Trade is water contamination, which we have identified as one of the most serious immediate environmental hazards on a coffee farm. Second is use of pesticides and herbicides. That's what we focus on. But there is every intention to expand our scope and consult with environmental experts to make the environmental component of DT more sophisticated and intense. It's a process, a crawl before you walk endeavor, where we want to ensure farmers the ability to earn a living from their coffee production and become economically secure. Then we can tighten some screws here and there, and bring them along with us. We march onwards towards the ideal.

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