



Success Story: *Farmer-to-Farmer* Volunteer Steve Johnson Helps Potato Growers Save and Store Seeds in Guatemala

Background

It's over 3,600 miles from Maine, United States to Sibinal, Guatemala, a mountainous municipality in the department of San Marcos found at the base of the Tacaná Volcano. Sibinal's population is approximately 27,000, the majority of which belong to the Mayan ethnic groups Mam or Kaqchikel. Many of these individuals make their livelihood growing potatoes in the rich volcanic soil, which provides an excellent habitat for crop yield.

For the past ten years, the Guatemalan National Potato Federation (FENAPAPA) has supported 2,000 small-scale potato producers in the San Marcos region. Like on some potato farms in Maine, potato producers in Sibinal save seeds for future plantation. However, seed potatoes in Sibinal have recently developed bacterial and fungi infections. As producers save seeds from season to season, the infections are transmitted, causing significantly smaller potatoes and consistently lower yields. While some producers wanted to explore using high-quality certified seed potatoes, they are expensive and FENAPAPA did not have access to information or technical assistance on how to maintain or produce certified seed potatoes.

Partners' Approach

In November 2015, Partners of the Americas connected with Dr. Steve Johnson, a potato storage and production expert with nearly 30 years' experience as a crop specialist at the University of Maine, and sent him to Sibinal as a volunteer through the *Farmer-to-Farmer* program. There, Dr. Johnson worked directly with FENAPAPA seed producers and technical staff. During his first week of assignment, Dr. Johnson visited several different plantations to meet with individual producers and assess their main storage and management issues. He also provided trainings on their production concerns related to planting, harvesting, yields, fertility, and seed spacing.



The following week, Dr. Johnson organized a two-day workshop for FENAPAPA members on how to produce certified seed potatoes. He also conducted separate workshops on proper management and storage of seed potatoes. After the workshop, members were not only able to improve their potato production, but they were also able to offer a new product to sell to other producers.

Impact

As a result of Dr. Johnson's visit, FENAPAPA producers reported an improved understanding of soil fertility for potato production, growth, and development. Dr. Johnson also left FENAPAPA with a series of recommendations to greatly improve their storage facilities, including adding wind and temperature control. By February 2016, FENAPAPA had already adopted all the recommendations.

“ *Partners of the Americas' Farmer-to-Farmer program is terrific. The trip had a dramatic effect on me. I have a passion for international agriculture, particularly helping people eat better and improve their life through better agricultural practices. The farmers I met, and hopefully helped, were pleased beyond words that someone with knowledge would come to the Guatemala highlands and walk on their farm to help them. The less they had, the more they wanted to give. More people need to see what I saw and feel what I felt, to realize how fortunate some people are, simply by where they were born.* ”

– Dr. Johnson



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FENAPAPA producers eagerly await the next potato harvest in October 2016 to see if, finally, their potatoes are disease-free and have increased yields.