



PRESS RELEASE

Ministerial Conference on Science and Technology

To Increase Agricultural Productivity

San José, Costa Rica, May 10-11, 2004

## First ministerial conference on agriculture, science and technology in the region ends

*For the first time, the ministers of agriculture of Central America, Mexico, and the Dominican Republic met with their counterparts from the ministries of science and technology, to discuss matters of common concern.*

**Costa Rica, 11 May 2004.** The ministers of agriculture and top-level science and technology officials from Mexico, Central America, the Dominican Republic and the United States met 10-11 May in Costa Rica. The aim of the event was to arrive at a shared vision that would make it possible to find solutions and tap the opportunities for applying science to real problems.

One of the hosts of the **Ministerial Conference on Science and Technology to Increase Agricultural Productivity**, Costa Rica's Minister of Agriculture, Rodolfo Coto Pacheco, said that "the participants included a buoyant private sector, one that believed in research and invested in it, with excellent results. He cited the coffee, milk and sugarcane industries as examples."

The Minister of Science and Technology of Costa Rica, Fernando Gutierrez, spoke of "science and technology's key role as a driving force for technical change, higher productivity, and the progress of the agricultural sector, a role that should be performed jointly by the countries and institutions that make up the various innovation systems."

U.S. Undersecretary of Agriculture Jim Butler took part in the closing session. He said "we all agree that countries which improve agricultural productivity are able to increase their incomes; to participate in global markets; to reduce hunger and poverty; and to improve the quality of life of the citizens."

He added "agriculture will continue to be the cornerstone of economies in Central America. As we have heard echoed by many of the speakers over the past two days, harnessing scientific knowledge to enhance agricultural productivity in an environmentally sustainable way remains a number one priority."

The Director General of the Inter-American Institute for Cooperation on Agriculture (IICA), Chelston Brathwaite, said the discussions at the Conference showed how investment in technology was essential to raise agricultural productivity and thereby help reduce poverty.

On average, almost 40% of all increases in food production in the Americas over the last two decades have been achieved by using modern technology to increase the variety of seeds and agronomic information.



At present, the production of the countries varies due to the uneven development of research and extension capabilities.

The relatively most developed countries usually invest between 1.5% and 2.5% of their Agricultural Gross Domestic Product in agricultural technology. For most Latin American and Caribbean countries, this figure is no more than 0.4%. However, some countries, such as Costa Rica, have gradually increased their investments aimed at improving agricultural technology.

### **Unprecedented regional meeting**

During the first Plenary Session, U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Ann M. Veneman asked, rhetorically, “why are we here? We are close neighbors in this hemisphere, connected by many strong bonds including culture, commerce and a strong love of freedom and democracy. We are appreciative of the essential nature of agriculture and the importance of having an efficient food system. We all recognize that our agriculture today faces increasingly complex issues.”

She issued a call to the ministers present: as leaders of a dynamic activity, it was up to them to find successful ways of tackling the issues, working together and sharing their knowledge and experiences.

The President of Costa Rica, Abel Pacheco, inaugurated the Conference. He noted that, for centuries, the only things needed to farm successfully were fertile land and good seed. Today the situation was different, however. In addition to good land and excellent seed, agriculture required adequate financing, timely and sufficient information, good infrastructure, fair marketing and, unquestionably, growing and intensive use of scientific knowledge and technological breakthroughs.

The conference that just ended in Costa Rica provided an opportunity to discuss, at the regional level, the global dialogue that took place at the *Ministerial Conference and Expo on Agricultural Science and Technology*, held in June 2003, in Sacramento, California. Organized by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, 119 ministerial-level participants from 117 nations attended the event.

The **Ministerial Conference on Science and Technology to Increase Agricultural Productivity** was held under the auspices of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), the Ministry of Agriculture and the Ministry of Science and Technology of Costa Rica, the State Department, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), and IICA.

Over 40 leading experts spoke during the Conference, focusing on a variety of issues during three plenary and nine breakout sessions. The aim was to answer three important questions:

- What is the status of agricultural technology in the region?
- What mechanisms are available for mobilizing science and technology on behalf of the agricultural sector?
- How is the region getting ready to meet the challenges of boosting food production and improving its participation in an increasingly open economy?

The ministers that sit on the Regional Council for Agricultural Cooperation (CORECA) took part. They represent the seven countries of the Central American isthmus, Mexico, and the

Dominican Republic. The Secretary for Agriculture of Mexico, Javier Usabiaga, was one of those in attendance.

The other participants included representatives of private enterprise, the academic community, nongovernmental organizations, and regional and international agencies.