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Ver 17 May 2023

Ecosystem Restoration Validation

Report for:
**Chiquita Brands Costa Rica SRL in the
project "Nogal Reserve – La Selva
Biodiversity connectivity project" in
Sarapiquí, Costa Rica**

Report Finalised: 27/ October / 2023.
Audit Dates: 17, 18, 19 October 2023
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Certificate expiry: 20 November 2025
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INTRODUCTION

This report presents the findings of an independent audit conducted by a team of specialists representing Preferred by Nature. The purpose of the audit was to evaluate the ecological, economic and social performance of Biodiversity connectivity project in Nogal Reserve of Chiquita Brands Costa Rica SRL restoration initiative as defined by the established Ecosystem Restoration Standard Version 3.1 by Preferred by Nature.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Project description

Chiquita Brands Costa Rica SRL is a banana producing company, with 5,500 employees in 30 farms (around 6,000 ha) distributed in the Atlantic area of Costa Rica. In addition, it buys fruit from independent producers, who are provided with advice and supervision in their work. The organization's mission is "To promote sustainability and biodiversity conservation, as well as the social and economic development of the agricultural communities where the Chiquita Brands Corporation operates, through environmental education, public-private partnerships, the active involvement of the inhabitants, and following the values of: Integrity, Respect, Opportunity and Responsibility".

Chiquita has a Private Life Refuge, called Nogal Reserve, which is located in the canton 10 Sarapiquí, district 1 Puerto Viejo, province 4 Heredia, in the North Caribbean of Costa Rica (Coordinates 10°29'23" north latitude and 83°56'15" west longitude). Sarapiquí has an area of 2,140.54 km², is one of the largest municipalities in the country, representing 4.62% of the national territory and 82% of the province of Heredia, and borders Nicaragua to the north (Municipality of Sarapiquí, 2017). The reserve is located in the middle of the *Sucio* river and is composed of tropical forest in different succession processes, totaling 92 hectares. The objectives of the Nogal Reserve are:

- Conserve biodiversity in the long term.
- Incentivize and promote the creation of biological corridors to increase forest area through the connectivity of forest patches.
- Promote environmental education in neighboring communities.
- Integrate communities as a key part of management and promote their development.

The objective of the Nogal Reserve – La Selva Biodiversity Connectivity Project is to connect 600 ha of tropical forest through the implementation biological corridors in small farms within an area of 15 ha, between three forest fragments: Nogal Reserve (92 ha), *Agrícola Sofía* (160 ha), and the Starke farm (340 ha), until it reaches the La Selva Biological Station, a point that is interrupted by the national highway Route 4.

The main issues identified, to be addressed by Chiquita, are:

1. To improve stakeholder engagement.
2. No documented dispute resolution mechanism was provided.
3. Social impacts and benefits are not documented, making it difficult to have a coherent view of how they will be monitored and evaluated over time.
4. Adaptation of the monitoring system after the development of point 2 above.
5. Clarity on resources for the implementation of the Monitoring Plan over a 5-year period.

1 AUDIT CONCLUSIONS

Audit Recommendation and Decision

Based on Organisation's conformance with the requirements, the following recommendation is made:

- Validation approved:
Upon acceptance of NCR(s) issued below

- Validation not approved:
Conformance with MAJOR NCR(s) required

Additional comments, including issues identified as controversial or hard to evaluate and explanation of the conclusion reached: NA

Non-conformity Reports (NCRs)

Note: NCRs refer to non-fulfilment of a requirement. In simpler terms this means that some part of the standard has not been correctly fulfilled and need to be corrected in order to maintain the verified/validated status.

No NCR(s) issued

NCR: 01/23	
Standard & Requirement:	Ecosystem Restoration Standard – A Social and Environmental Standard for Field Verification of Restoration Initiatives version 3.1. 1.4.4; 1.4.7; 2.4.1
Report Section:	Annex I
Description of Non-conformance and Related Evidence:	
During the audit process, no evidence was found of consultation in a transparent and effective manner with beneficiaries or people in the area on traditional best practices in relation to the planning, implementation or monitoring of the restoration project. While it is true that there is knowledge of the project, there is no effective involvement.	
Corrective action request:	Organisation shall implement corrective actions to demonstrate conformance with the requirement(s) referenced above. Note: Effective corrective actions focus on addressing the specific occurrence described in evidence above, as well as the root cause to eliminate and prevent recurrence of the non-conformance.
Timeline for Conformance:	2 years, after which a new validation (or verification) is required
Evidence Provided by Organisation:	PENDING
Findings for Evaluation of Evidence:	PENDING
NCR Status:	OPEN
Comments (optional):	

NCR: 02/23	
Standard & Requirement:	Ecosystem Restoration Standard – A Social and Environmental Standard for Field Verification of Restoration Initiatives version 3.1. 1.5.5; 3.3.6.1
Report Section:	Annex I
Description of Non-conformance and Related Evidence:	
During the audit process, the description of potential environmental and social impacts, whether positive or negative, could not be evidenced. The project addresses the positive aspect of connectivity for biodiversity and the economic benefit for potential beneficiaries, but issues of potential positive impacts for the community resulting from the project's connectivity have not been addressed.	
Corrective action request:	Organisation shall implement corrective actions to demonstrate conformance with the requirement(s) referenced above. Note: Effective corrective actions focus on addressing the specific occurrence described in evidence above, as well as the root cause to eliminate and prevent recurrence of the non-conformance.
Timeline for Conformance:	2 years, after which a new validation (or verification) is required
Evidence Provided by Organisation:	PENDING
Findings for Evaluation of Evidence:	PENDING
NCR Status:	OPEN
Comments (optional):	

NCR: 03/23	
Standard & Requirement:	Ecosystem Restoration Standard – A Social and Environmental Standard for Field Verification of Restoration Initiatives version 3.1. 1.5.6
Report Section:	Annex I
Description of Non-conformance and Related Evidence:	
During the audit process, no evidence could be found that there is plan on how the sustainability of the project will be ensured after the 5 years of the project agreement with the funder partner.	
Corrective action request:	Organisation shall implement corrective actions to demonstrate conformance with the requirement(s) referenced above. Note: Effective corrective actions focus on addressing the specific occurrence described in evidence above, as well as the root cause to eliminate and prevent recurrence of the non-conformance.

Timeline for Conformance:	2 years, after which a new validation (or verification) is required
Evidence Provided by Organisation:	PENDING
Findings for Evaluation of Evidence:	PENDING
NCR Status:	OPEN
Comments (optional):	

NCR: 04/23	
Standard & Requirement:	Ecosystem Restoration Standard – A Social and Environmental Standard for Field Verification of Restoration Initiatives version 3.1. 2.1
Report Section:	Annex I
Description of Non-conformance and Related Evidence:	
During the audit process, it was not possible to verify that there is a formal agreement between Chiquita Brands and the owners of the farms on which the restoration project is intended to be carried out.	
Corrective action request:	Organisation shall implement corrective actions to demonstrate conformance with the requirement(s) referenced above. Note: Effective corrective actions focus on addressing the specific occurrence described in evidence above, as well as the root cause to eliminate and prevent recurrence of the non-conformance.
Timeline for Conformance:	2 years, after which a new validation (or verification) is required
Evidence Provided by Organisation:	PENDING
Findings for Evaluation of Evidence:	PENDING
NCR Status:	OPEN
Comments (optional):	

NCR: 05/23	
Standard & Requirement:	Ecosystem Restoration Standard – A Social and Environmental Standard for Field Verification of Restoration Initiatives version 3.1. 2.5.1
Report Section:	Annex I
Description of Non-conformance and Related Evidence:	
The interviews held with the RM evidenced that there is no clear dispute resolution process within the scope of the project, neither with the beneficiaries nor with persons or organizations outside the project.	
Corrective action request:	Organisation shall implement corrective actions to demonstrate conformance with the requirement(s) referenced above. Note: Effective corrective actions focus on addressing the specific occurrence described in evidence above, as well as the root cause to eliminate and prevent recurrence of the non-conformance.
Timeline for Conformance:	2 years, after which a new validation (or verification) is required
Evidence Provided by Organisation:	PENDING
Findings for Evaluation of Evidence:	PENDING
NCR Status:	OPEN
Comments (optional):	

NCR: 06/23	
Standard & Requirement:	Ecosystem Restoration Standard – A Social and Environmental Standard for Field Verification of Restoration Initiatives version 3.1. 4.3.2
Report Section:	Annex I
Description of Non-conformance and Related Evidence:	
During the audit process, no evidence of monitoring actions could be found that includes the health condition of the plantation (pests and diseases). Likewise, we found no evidence of taking measures for continuous improvement based on monitoring results.	
Corrective action request:	Organisation shall implement corrective actions to demonstrate conformance with the requirement(s) referenced above. Note: Effective corrective actions focus on addressing the specific occurrence described in evidence above, as well as the root cause to eliminate and prevent recurrence of the non-conformance.
Timeline for Conformance:	2 years, after which a new validation (or verification) is required

Evidence Provided by Organisation:	PENDING
Findings for Evaluation of Evidence:	PENDING
NCR Status:	OPEN
Comments (optional):	

Observations

Note: Observations are issued for the early stages of a problem which does not of itself constitute a non-conformance, but which the auditor considers may lead to a future non-conformance if not addressed by the organisation; observations may lead to direct non-conformances if not addressed.

No observation(s) issued

OBS: 01/23	Standard & Requirement:	Ecosystem Restoration Standard – A Social and Environmental Standard for Field Verification of Restoration Initiatives version 3.1, 1.4.6; 3.2.3.5
	Report Section	Annex I
Description of findings leading to observation:	During the interviews with the RM the importance of protect water courses was explained, however during the field visits was founded a lack of good practices on the watercourses carried out for the potential beneficiaries. At the moment these activities are not under the management of the organization, but during the implementation of the project these aspects need to be addressed and managed.	
Observation:	The Organization should develop a strategy to work on the protection of watercourses in the implementation phase of the project.	

OBS: 02/23	Standard & Requirement:	Ecosystem Restoration Standard – A Social and Environmental Standard for Field Verification of Restoration Initiatives version 3.1, 1.5.7
	Report Section	Annex I
Description of findings leading to observation:	A first version of the restoration plan could be seen: CBLN-LS CHIQUITA SOK PROJECT.	
Observation:	The Organization should improve the structure and development of the restoration plan. Particularly, but not limited, in the restoration activity implementation and monitoring.	

OBS: 03/23	Standard & Requirement:	Ecosystem Restoration Standard – A Social and Environmental Standard for Field Verification of Restoration Initiatives version 3.1, 1.7
	Report Section	Annex I
Description of findings leading to observation:	In the documentary review of the CBLN-LS CHIQUITA SOK PROJECT, two phases of monitoring are shown, the first in the short term up to year 1.5, making measurements of diameter at breast height and height of the plants. In the long term they will carry out tours and observation of fauna, for year 4 the installation of camera traps will be evaluated. It is proposed for year 6 to evaluate the possibility of conducting an inventory for the registration of new plant species that have managed to establish themselves at the site.	
Observation:	The Organization should improve the monitoring plan, incorporating indicators and metrics that help increase the impact of the project.	

OBS: 04/23	Standard & Requirement:	Ecosystem Restoration Standard – A Social and Environmental Standard for Field Verification of Restoration Initiatives version 3.1, 3.2.3.5
	Report Section	Annex I
Description of findings leading to observation:	During the visit to Breyner and Filadelfo's farm, the borders of water sources containing herbicide could be observed.	
Observation:	The Organization should take measures to ensure that such situations do not arise in the process of implementing the project.	

Stakeholder consultation

The purpose of stakeholder consultation is threefold:

1. Ensure that the public is aware of and informs about the evaluation process and its objectives.
2. Assist the field assessment team in identifying potential problems; and
3. Provide diverse opportunities for the public to discuss and act on the findings of the evaluation.

This process is not just about notifying stakeholders, but, as far as possible, about detailed and meaningful interaction with stakeholders. The process of interacting with stakeholders does not stop after field visits or, for that matter, even after a validation decision is made. Preferred by Nature welcomes, at any time, feedback on verified projects and such feedback often provides a basis for field evaluation.

Stakeholder Type (NGO, government bodies, local inhabitant, contractor etc.)	Stakeholders Notified (#)¶	Stakeholders consulted directly or provided input (#)
National/International NGOs	1	1
Local/Regional NGOs	1	1
Local Community members	5	4
Government Agency	2	1

The table below summarises the issues identified by the assessment team with a brief discussion of each based upon specific interview and/or public meeting comments.

1: Planning	
Stakeholder comment	Preferred by Nature response
<p>We don't know exactly what connectivity project the organization is proposing. In the past we have shared specific information, but currently we do not know what the scope of the proposed project is.</p> <p>We cannot give a technical opinion on the project because we do not know the technical details of it.</p>	<p>Preferred by Nature conducted interviews with local and international NGOs, Costa Rican state agencies, as well as community members and community leaders. In all cases, knowledge of the biodiversity connectivity project is known, however there is no clear understanding of the activities planned around the restoration project. The lack of communication around the activities that are going to be implemented as well as the social and environmental benefits that the project will bring is evident.</p>
<p>We have had communication with the technical staff of the organization and we know the goal of improving the wildlife in the area. We are in favor of the project, but we do not know the size of the reforestation project or the economic benefit we will receive from it.</p>	<p>See NCR 01/23</p>
2: Tenure, Rights & Engagement	
Stakeholder comment	Preferred by Nature response
<p>The communication channels are always open with the organization and we believe that the organization is making a very good effort around landscape connectivity.</p>	<p>All parties consulted have heard about the project and agree to participate in the project. However, there is no formal agreement regarding the use of the areas projected for the connectivity corridor, which is why NCR 04/23 has been raised.</p> <p>It is necessary to highlight the concern for the continuity of the project in the long term (more than 5 years) and this goes hand in hand with what was observed in NCR 03/23.</p>
<p>I believe that one of the challenges of the project is going to be to maintain the project over time, the work of keeping the beneficiaries within the project will be important.</p>	
<p>So far we have maintained close communication with the technical staff of the project and we agree to do the project, but there is still no signed contract, nor do we know what the conditions of this contract are.</p>	
3: Implementation	
Stakeholder comment	Preferred by Nature response
<p>NA</p>	<p>NA</p>
4: Monitoring and Reporting	

Stakeholder comment	Preferred by Nature response
NA	NA

Actions taken by Organisation Prior to Report Finalisation

The organisation provides the cooperation agreement between Chiquita Brands and SUOMEN OSUUSKAUPPOJEN KESKUSKUNTA (SOK)

2 AUDIT PROCESS

Standard Used

Standards Used (including version):	Ecosystem Restoration Standard – A Social and Environmental Standard for Field Verification of Restoration Initiatives, version 3.1
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Audit Team and accompanying persons

Name	Role and qualifications
Hernán Zaldívar Schrader (HZ)	Lead Auditor. Hernan has a background in forestry with more than 15 years of experience in forest management, agribusiness and restoration. He was FSC's Market Development Manager in the Latin America Regional Office and leader of Climate-Smart Agriculture at Solidaridad Network. Hernán works at Preferred by Nature as Ecosystem Restoration Specialist, responsible for the Validation and Verification services of restoration projects globally. Hernán also has a master's degree in Agribusiness from the Tropical Agronomic Research and Higher Education Center – CATIE in Costa Rica and coordinates the Monitoring and Transparency Working Group of the 20x20 Initiative.
Marlene Ibañez (MI)	Local Expert. Marlene has a degree in industrial engineering and has a professional background in various sustainability certification and verification schemes. He has in-depth knowledge of the Costa Rican rural sector and the interaction with the main actors in the region.
Mateo Cariño Fraisse (MCF)	RRA (Report Review). Mateo is the Land Use Program Manager and leader of the Ecosystem Restoration Program at Preferred by Nature, with extensive experience in forest and carbon audits (FSC, PEFC, CCB, VCS, Gold Standard, Plan Vivo, Carbon Footprint Management, etc.) since 2000 worldwide. With a background in Forestry Engineering, Mateo has been involved in the social aspects of sustainability with smallholder farmers, indigenous and traditional communities, and areas such as gender, labour rights or FPIC.

Audit Overview

Note: The table below provides an overview of the audit scope and auditors. See standard checklist annex for specific details on people interviewed and audit findings per site audited.

Site(s)	Date(s)	Main activities	Auditor(s)
Nogal Reserve office	17- Oct - 2023	Opening Meeting, Document Review, Restoration Manager Interview	HZ y MI
Biological station La Selva	17- Oct - 2023	Stakeholders interviews	HZ
Beneficiaries farms	17- Oct - 2023	Stakeholders interviews	HZ y MI
Fundecor office	18- Oct - 2023	Stakeholders interviews	HZ y MI
Nogal Reserve office	18- Oct - 2023	Document review	HZ y MI
Beneficiaries farms	18- Oct - 2023	Stakeholders interviews	HZ y MI
Fundecor office	19- Oct - 2023	Stakeholders interviews	HZ
MS Teams	19- Oct - 2023	Stakeholders interviews	HZ
Reserva Nogal office	19- Oct - 2023	Closing meeting	HZ y MI
Total number of person days used: 10 (including days spent in travel and report writing and review)			

Description of Overall Audit Process

The field audit was conducted from October 17 to 19, 2023, preceded by document review and information exchange sessions with the leader of the Nogal Reserve. During the field audit, the potential restoration areas of the 10 farms projected to be part of the biodiversity connectivity project were visited, the owners present during the audit days and those in charge of the farm were interviewed. Other governmental and non-governmental organizations that are part of civil society in the area, as well as community leaders, were also contacted.

The methodology consisted of triangulating the documented information provided by the Nogal Reserve's technical team, interviews with potential beneficiaries and community members and other stakeholders. The audit team, which consisted of 2 people, worked conducting sometimes separate visits and interviews, in order to gather information about the project and

seek evidence of compliance with the standard. As it is a project in the planning phase, there are no implementation activities in the field, so the process was defined as a validation. However, reference sites of previous similar interventions were visited as part of the validation process.

Finally, a closing meeting was held at the Notal Reserve offices to present a summary of preliminary findings and next steps in the process with the Restoration Manager and Leader of the Notal Reserve.

2.1.1 List of sites selected for evaluation.

Site	Rationale for Selection
Finca Manuel	Selected area for the implementation of the connectivity restoration project.
Finca Las Viñas	Selected area for the implementation of the connectivity restoration project.
Finca Ronald	Selected area for the implementation of the connectivity restoration project.
Finca Filadelfo	Selected area for the implementation of the connectivity restoration project.
Finca Cirilo	Selected area for the implementation of the connectivity restoration project.
Finca Breyner	Selected area for the implementation of the connectivity restoration project.
Finca Bernal	Selected area for the implementation of the connectivity restoration project.
Finca Chiquita Brands	Selected area for the implementation of the connectivity restoration project.
Finca IDA INDER	Selected area for the implementation of the connectivity restoration project.
Finca IDA INDER - 2	Selected area for the implementation of the connectivity restoration project.
Notal Reserve	Initial point of the biological corridor
"El Leon" Connectivity Pass	Former connectivity restoration area.

2.1.2 List of management aspects reviewed by assessment team

Type of site	Sites visited	Type of site	Sites visited
Road construction		Illegal settlement	
Soil drainage		Bridges/stream crossing	
Workshop		Chemical storage	
Tree nursery		Wetland	
Planned planting site	10	Steep slope/erosion	
Ongoing harvest site		Riparian zone	
Completed logging		Planting	
Soil scarification		Direct seeding	
Planting site		Weed control	
Felling by harvester		Natural regeneration	
Felling by forest worker		Endangered species	
Skidding/Forwarding		Wildlife management	
Clearfelling/Clearcut		Nature Reserve	2
Shelterwood management		Key Biotope	
Selective felling		Special management area	
Sanitation cutting		Historical site	
Pre-commercial thinning		Recreational site	
Logging camp		Local community	
Native reference sites	1	Permanent Monitoring Plot	

3 ORGANISATION DETAILS

Organisation specific background information

Ownership and land tenure description (legal and customary)
<p>The United Fruit Company (UFCO), now Chiquita Brands Costa Rica S.R.L., was established in Costa Rica after the opening of the Atlantic Railroad in 1945. Currently, the banana industry in Costa Rica has about 30 farms (around 6,000 ha) distributed in the Atlantic area of the country. The company's banana farms adjacent to the Notal Reserve are the Notal and Guayacán farms. The first has a production area of 338 hectares of banana cultivation for export. The neighbouring farm, Guayacán, produces on 273 ha. The Notal Reserve (92 ha) is an area under the category of Private National Wildlife Refuge. The areas destined for the realization of the biological corridor are in the possession of smallholders.</p>
Legislative and government regulatory context
<p>The Notal Reserve is regulated by the Wildlife Conservation Law No. 7317, its regulations and all its amendments. Regarding the areas proposed to intervene in the project, the land tenure of the farms is private, as all these farms are located on the border of the <i>Sucio</i> River, they need to comply with the Costa Rican Forestry Law No. 7575 and its Article 33 that declare a 15-meter strip in rural areas as forest protection areas.</p>
Environmental Context
<p>The project is located within an area of highly fragmented forests by the areas of agricultural production, mainly the production of bananas and cattle, as well as human settlements. The project is located in the area of influence of the San Juan-La Selva biological corridor, where forest areas isolated by the activities mentioned above can be observed. The Notal Reserve is a strip of very humid tropical forest of 92 ha, which borders the <i>Sucio</i> River, in the area of influence is the Starke Farm, which is a very humid tropical forest of 340 ha, as well as Agrícola Sofia, of 160 ha. Currently, 339 vertebrate species have been described in the area of influence, representing approximately 21.3% of the wild vertebrate species in Costa Rica (excluding marine species). Among the groups inventoried are: birds with 230 species that represent approximately 25% of the total birds registered for the country, 48 species of mammals which means about 22% of the mammals for CR, 40 species of reptiles and 21 species of amphibians that represent 16% and 10% respectively of the species recorded.</p>
Socioeconomic Context
<p>The Project is located in the Sarapiquí Canton, where there is a density of 27 people/km² distributed in 5 districts: Puerto Viejo (Municipal Capital), La Virgen, Horquetas, Llanuras del Gaspar and Cureña. Compared to the census carried out in 2000, there was a significant increase in the population, going from 45,335 inhabitants to 60,185 according to the 2011 census. The population growth of Sarapiquí has shown three moments: (i) The period of installation of the Standard Fruit Company in Río Frio at the end of the 1960s. (ii) During the 1970s and mid-1980s as a result of multiple land invasions, (iii) and in the early 1990s with the banana expansion in Puerto Viejo. With regard to the social situation in Sarapiquí, the rate of temporary and informal employment is very high and the percentage of poor families is 35% of the total population. Agriculture and livestock have been the traditional productive activities. The main crops in the area are: pineapple, banana, palm heart, plantain and "yuca". Ecological and adventure tourism have recently emerged, increasing trade activities and related services.</p>

General overview of the organisation and scope

The Nogal Reserve is a 92 ha Private Wildlife Refuge, owned by Chiquita Brands Costa Rica. The connectivity project consists of the reforestation of 15 hectares biodiversity corridors in areas that are owned by people outside the organization, who have exclusive ownership over their land. The names and total areas of the farms with which the Nogal Reserve – La Selva biodiversity corridor is planned to be built are indicated below:

Potential project partner	Area (ha)
IDA-INDER	8.9
IDA-INDER	12.2
Zaida Maria Cubillo Solano/ Manuel Antonio Mora Gomí	2.7
Chiquita Brands CR SRL	0.4
Steven Alfaro/Marco Alfaro	14.5
Filadelfo Prado Carvajal/ Ana Betty Gamboa Fallas	16.4
Breynier F. Prado Gamboa	11.7
Cirilo Gutierrez Gutierrez/ Sinai Hernandez Sanchez	9.1
Bernal Rojas Guerrero	9.79
Ronald M Hernandez Pereira	8.4

