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UNIDOS DE AMÉRICA

**EL SALVADOR**

## Success Story: Small Farmers Achieve Success with Watermelon



Field of watermelon at an early developmental stage.



Field of watermelon at a mature developmental stage.



Farmers showing their watermelon produce.

Photos: Fintrac Inc.

Lempa Acahuapa, San Vicente, is located toward the center of El Salvador in a zone where most farming is not irrigated. In the past, approximately 100 hectares of watermelon were cultivated by local farmers using only natural precipitation. At that time, the crop was 90% Charleston variety, which is popular in El Salvador and known for its elongated fruit. Now, due to an increase in pests and disease problems, the susceptible Charleston cultivar has been replaced by new varieties characterized by a round fruit (Mickelee and Perola, among others) that demonstrate increased pest and disease resistance. At first, the cultivation of the round fruit varieties was not carried out according to ideal specifications, as there was lack of knowledge regarding fertilization requirements and general cultivation techniques. Consequently, the farmers' investment per hectare, which did not exceed \$1,000, resulted in a return of approximately \$430 per hectare. Likewise, fruit production did not exceed 17 metric tons per hectare in the best of cases – compared to yields of 45 to 60 metric tons of the same crop grown for export via drip irrigation.

Through USAID's Agricultural Diversification Program, a group of 39 growers of non-irrigated watermelon (representing a total area of 87.6 hectares) took part in a series of workshops that effectively increased their yield by 32 percent, or 25 metric tons per hectare, while also increasing their average net profit to around \$1,144 per hectare. The workshops trained the farmers to implement a watermelon cultivation scheme specific to their zone and a fertilization plan catered to the requirements of the crop. During the program, the participating farmers were trained in soil sampling and analysis, soil preparation and fertilization, and Integrated Pest Management (IPM) and the safe use of pesticides. Farmers also received hands-on instruction in the proper management of crop residue and weeds.

By implementing the recommended techniques, the farmers achieved an increase in both their productivity and earnings. The portion of premium grade fruit was over 60 percent, for which the farmers earned a better price, leading to a 260 percent increase in revenues.

Omar Wilfredo Martinez commented: "You can see a better developed plant – one with better foliage, greener color and longer lasting fruit, which is what the consumer wants."

Jose Cortes said "At the start we weren't convinced that if we improved the nutrition of the plant then we would see such good results. But at harvest time, we saw that we had improved the watermelon to the premium grade level, with better color, flavor and size. And we received a better price for it."