

# PALM OIL PRODUCED WITH CONSCIENCE

**SUSTAINABLY GROWN :** It's vital for producers to develop guidelines that complement the RSPO criteria

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**T**HE Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO) is generally considered the "gold standard" in palm oil certification.

Pierre Bois d'Enghien, a renowned agronomist and environmental expert, says the organisation's certification process has been in place for more than 10 years.

RSPO, a non-profit organisation, combines stakeholders from seven sectors of the palm oil industry that develop and implement global standards for a sustainable palm oil industry.

They comprise producers, processors or traders, and downstream players, such as consumer goods manufactur-



*A plantation worker walking along rows of oil palm. (Inset) The rules that RSPO places on conservation in the production of palm oil are unmatched by other certification schemes.*

ers, retailers, banks and investors.

It also includes environmental and non-governmental organisations.

“The RSPO has a broad range of stakeholders. It has ‘brand recognition’ among producers, financial institutions, purchasers and other bodies.”

Bois d’Enghien says Southeast Asia is the focus of the organisation’s certification scheme and activities.

“This isn’t surprising as close to 90 per cent of the world’s oil palm is grown in Southeast Asia. This certification grew out of concern for the environment in that region.”

He says there is a level of antipathy — albeit unintended — in other parts of the world where oil palm is grown.

“Because of this, there are certain elements of RSPO that simply do not work in other contexts.”

He says one example is the RSPO’s criteria on pest control.

“It requires the reduction or elimination of all pesticides that are classified as ‘1A’ or ‘1B’ in terms of toxicity by the World Health Organisation.”

Bois d’Enghien says it also requires the same action for any substances listed under the Rotterdam Convention.

However, this criteria interferes with the control of blast disease, which affects crops, particularly oil palm seedlings in Africa. A severe case in Ghana in 1994 had totally wiped out the growing stock of the Ghana Oil Palm Development Company.

“The only effective treatment for this disease is the application of carbofuran. This is a pesticide that falls under the ‘1B’ classification, which is highly hazardous. Due to its toxicity, only a few countries permit its use.

“The exceptions are the United States, Canada, European Union and African countries that do not grow oil palm at an industrial level.”

The use of carbofuran is controlled under the Rotterdam Convention and requires certain handling protocols.



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Furthermore, Bois d’Enghien says the pesticide is recognised as the only treatment for blast disease in oil palm crops by the International Fund for Agricultural Development, which is a United Nations agency.

“Leaving blast disease untreated can wipe out operations. One agricultural development programme had to suspend loan repayments from farmers following an outbreak.

“But because this disease — and the insect suspected of carrying it — is not prevalent in Southeast Asia, there is no need to use the pesticide widely.”

The RSPO principles and criteria, which are revised every five years, state that there should be no prophylactic use of pesticides, except in specific situations identified in national best practice guidelines.

“But prophylactic use is essential in preventing blast disease. When the soil moisture drops below a certain point, trees will become susceptible. And, national best practice guidelines do not exist in most African countries.”

He says the RSPO principles and criteria state that the organisation will “urgently” identify alternatives for these chemicals. But the fact is that there is no urgency outside of Africa.

“This is something of a policy vacuum here. There is no doubt that when the principles and criteria were written, all the best intentions were there, whether it was the development of national guidelines and interpretations, or coming up with an alternative to carbofuran.

“But at this stage, this is a problem that has fallen through the cracks.”

There is a dilemma in the use of carbofuran as it has been recommended as an alternative to more toxic pesticides that are banned under the Stockholm Convention.

In regard to the farmers in Africa, the obvious thing to do is for the governments there to develop national best practice guidelines.

“This is easier said than done. This takes time and money and often requires a level of political and bureau-



**The RSPO is trying to find alternatives to the use of pesticides in oil palm seedlings.**

cratic will that is often lacking.”

He says this particular gap shows that the criteria and principles of RSPO may not be applicable in every context.

They may have been put together in Singapore or Geneva, but they aren’t applicable in every country.

“It also underlines the fact that, sometimes, the will and the financial means may be there to implement RSPO rules at the firm level, but at the national level, it is not high on the list.”

Watering down the principles and criteria on pesticide use is also not acceptable. Perhaps, instead, it will be possible for RSPO to recognise interim national interpretations, or accept national interpretations on specific issues.

Bois d’Enghien says under RSPO’s certification rules, it is likely such a measure can work via its board of directors.

“It will also likely to be subjected to feedback from RSPO’s NGO members.”

He says the worst-case scenario is that plantation developers are likely to open more plantations in Africa without certification.

“There are alternative means of financing. The market for vegetable oil in Africa is large and getting larger.

“This means that these operations will not be subjected to RSPO rules.”

Bois d’Enghien says one of the good points about palm oil is that it is the only agricultural commodity subjected to high production standards that are widely accepted.

He says the rules that RSPO places on high conservation values and set-asides are unmatched by any other certification schemes.

“No other crop has the same level of scrutiny. One of the dangers is that if the bar is set too high, plantation owners will either switch to another crop with low (or no) scrutiny whatsoever.

“This can’t be an outcome that RSPO or NGOs will be happy with. This will mean worse environmental, social and economic outcomes across the board.

“In other words, a compromise isn’t just preferable. It’s necessary, particularly if the overall objective is sustainability,” he says.