

Soy farmers find common ground, even in different hemispheres

by [Bridget Macdonald](#)

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Archer Daniels Midland Co. announced plans Wednesday to work toward developing sustainable soy farming practices in Brazil by fostering partnerships with growers, reflecting an increasingly cooperative trend in global agriculture that reaches to Illinois.

The Decatur, Ill., company is partnering with Alianca Da Terra, a Brazilian agricultural organization that advocates for sustainable farming, and plans to expand the program once it gets off the ground, enabling partnerships with more farmers.

The company will pay Alianca Da Terra for each productive hectare of farmland the organization evaluates to determine strengths and areas for improvement, but farmers will have no obligation to reimburse ADM for the analysis, ADM spokeswoman Beth Ragan said in an e-mail.

“As part of this arrangement, [Alianca Da Terra] will also provide growers with assistance in agricultural best management practices,” she said.

In 1997, ADM began to operate in the South American soybean market to offset the seasonal lull in production in the U.S. Although the U.S. had dominated the world market since World War II, the yields from Brazil and the Midwest are about the same now, said Peter Goldsmith, the executive director of the National Soy Research Laboratory. But the company's commitment to Brazil has “bigger implications than Illinois,” he said. For both producers and manufacturers, collaboration means sharing risk on a global scale.

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With a vision similar to that of the giant food-processing corporation, but with a local agenda, the Illinois Soybean Association is undertaking its own initiative to create relationships among soy farmers. On Feb. 5, nine directors from the association will travel to Brazil to initiate a collaborative program with their counterparts in the southern hemisphere. The committee will spend a week with board members from Mato Grosso Soy Growers Association, known as Aprosoja.

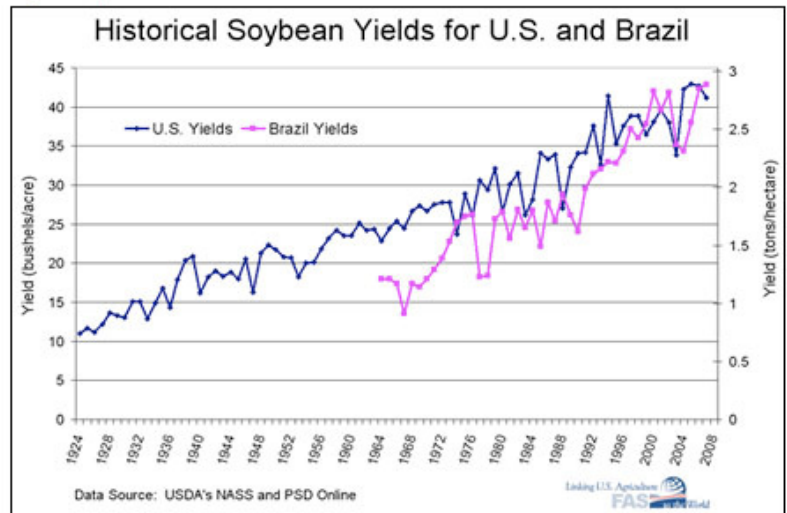


Figure 6. Brazil Soybean Yields Compared to the U.S.

Bridget Macdonald/Medill

U.S. Department of Agriculture
Brazil's soybean yields have gradually improved to the level of U.S. yields.

“We are a world economy now,” said Chris Bickett, senior director of ISA. “Growers in Brazil are no longer competitors, but partners in working to get soy to people who are hungry all over the world.”

The group, which will visit a farm progress show and several producers, is focused on addressing the challenges facing the soybean industry in both Illinois and Brazil, Bickett said. Increasing demand, the impacts of recession and environmental concerns are burdens shared by soybean farmers around the world. Collaboration is necessary to meet needs responsibly in what has become a global market, Bickett said. “We want to figure out how we can better serve producers in both places,” he said.

After the U.S., Brazil is the second-largest producer of soybeans in the world, and both markets are expanding. Last year, the harvest area in the U.S. was 74 million acres. In Illinois alone, 8.6 million acres of soybeans were harvested in 2008, up from 8.2 million in 2007, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Brazil’s annual soybean report, released in June, reported that farmers produced 1 million more tons of soybeans than the previous year on 4 percent more land.

The landmark meeting between ISA and Aprosoja is a “phenomenal opportunity” for growers to share resources, Goldsmith said.

“It’s not a tourist trip,” he said. “With globalization, we need common standards, especially when demand for food is so critical.”

Although the demand for soy must be met, sustainable practices are essential, particularly given the implications of global climate change. To ensure responsible growth the industry must focus on increasing yield, not expanding acreage, Goldsmith said.

Archer Daniels Midland’s new initiative indicates there is corporate support for progressive development. Domingo Lastra, the president of the company’s South American business, echoed the sentiments of ISA. “By providing farmers with the training they need to increase their yields in sustainable, environmentally responsible ways, we can help minimize further expansion into environmentally sensitive areas,” he said in a press release.

The association’s trip in February is just the beginning of collaboration between Illinois and Brazil. In the short term, the visit is more about dialogue than big breakthroughs, but conversation amounts to progress in a market where until recently, meetings revolved around driving up prices rather than solving problems, Goldsmith said.