

ORGANIC — PRONATEC — COCOA

Swiss supplier looks to West African sources for organic fair trade cocoa

Swiss organic cocoa processors Pronatec has announced new partnerships in Sierra Leone to ensure it can continue to meet demand for its premium beans in the face of dwindling stocks on the global market

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Demand for organic cocoa beans from Sierra Leone has risen due to global shortages. Image: UNDP Sierra Leone / Janet Dabire

"The supply of organic cocoa remains under pressure. To be able to continue supplying our customers with the quantities they need, in recent months, we have been proactively looking for new suppliers in Central and West Africa and visiting them," the company said in a statement posted on its website.

Established 45 years ago, Pronatec opened a purpose-built organic processing facility in Beringen near Schaffhausen in 2022 to cater to the growing demand for organic chocolate and cocoa derivatives.

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The company said it has been unable to fully meet the demand with its organic and Fairtrade cocoa beans sourced from Latin America due to variations in the harvest, combined with extreme weather events such as heavy rain and periods of drought.

Pronatec owns a subsidiary supplier, YACAO, in the Dominican Republic that provides it with a secure supply of high-quality certified organic and fair trade cocoa.

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It has confirmed that it has located high-quality organic cocoa from various sources in Central and West Africa and strengthened a partnership with Lizard Earth in Sierra Leone.

Nicolo Rieben, Pronatec's head of cocoa beans, told cocoaradar.com: "The cocoa market is expected to remain highly challenging in 2025 due to ongoing supply shortages. The key question is when persistently high prices will start to weigh on demand, ultimately affecting the stock market.

"Given the limited availability of organic-certified cocoa in the Dominican Republic, we must expand our sourcing to other countries to sustain production volumes.

"For several years, we have been sourcing cocoa from the sustainable Lizard Earth project in Sierra Leone, a country that offers significant quantities of organic and Fairtrade-certified cocoa with relatively low levels of heavy metals.

"To secure sufficient supply, we are now collaborating with additional cooperatives in Sierra Leone to meet our needs."

Higher prices for farmers

Pronatec said it is now in a position to help African cocoa farmers by introducing them to the same successful long-established "organic/fair trade" model that the company has been implementing for many years in Latin America, thereby guaranteeing them higher and more stable prices

Lizard Earth was founded in 2019 with help from the 'Welthungerhilfe' aid agency. The company was awarded organic certification in 2020.

Founder Daniel Scholler has been operating in Sierra Leone since 2014 and working with Pronatec since 2021, its main buyer of organic cocoa.

Lizard Earth works with smallholders in the Kenema region in eastern Sierra Leone, where cocoa has grown for over 80 years. The soil in this region, close to the Gola National Park, is ideal for cultivating cocoa.

An added bonus is that there is no volcanic soil in Kenema, which means cadmium levels in the beans are very low.

The quality requirements for the farmers who are members of the Lizard Earth network are high. The smallholders follow a strict fermentation protocol and are paid for 'wet cocoa', which is unusual in the region and brings considerable advantages for the farmers, including receiving their money faster.

Sierra Leone cocoa

Sierra Leone is an emerging cocoa-producing country in West Africa with a growing reputation for high-quality, fine-flavour cocoa, like its counterparts in South America.

While it cannot match the output of major producers like Cote d'Ivoire and Ghana, its cocoa sector is expanding due to increased investment, favourable climate conditions, and government support.

Sierra Leone's annual cocoa production is estimated at approximately 24,000 MT, significantly lower than neighboring countries but steadily increasing, of which:

- **Conventional cocoa: 40%**
- **Organic cocoa: 60%**
- **Craft/Premium: >1%**

Cocoa sourced from Lizard Earth is also EUDR-compliant and operates based on communities rather than cooperatives. For that reason, it is not Fairtrade-certified as being organised in cooperatives is one of the requirements for the Fairtrade label.

'Beyond Fairtrade'

Pronatec said that, in reality, Lizard Earth's social standards go beyond Fairtrade requirements. The smallholders with whom Lizard Earth works generally don't live in isolation out on their fields, as is usually the case in West Africa, but in communities.

Lizard Earth said it performs various tasks for these communities, including internal control systems, processing, and market access.

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