

Trip Report: Ferrier, Haiti
February 11-22, 2013

Introduction

For most of the 30+ years World Hunger Relief, Inc. has been active in NE Haiti, Jackson Nelson provided the leadership and vision which guided our efforts in agriculture, water supply and education. Last September, Jackson's death following heart surgery threw the community into mourning and uncertainty. While his family, and other Haitians involved in the ministry he directed, have pledged to continue his legacy, this trip was my first opportunity to see first hand how they are faring.

Jackson's widow, Ilde, and their son, Hudson, have stepped in to provide overall leadership to FONJANEPS, the foundation he began in the year before his death. While other individuals manage many of the day-to-day activities of the *Collège de l'Avenir de Ferrier* (primary school), *Ecole Technique Agricole de Ferrier* (ag technical school), well drilling, and construction; Ilde and Hudson clearly hold authority and responsibility for larger decisions. They manage agriculture activities (extension and credit) more directly.

The stress of new responsibilities has been exacerbated by the discovery of significant financial obligations of which they were not aware. Nonetheless, they step forward boldly in the faith that God will continue to bless and provide. They also anticipate the return of Jackson's daughter, Nirla, who has been completing her training as a physician in the Dominican Republic. She plans to return to Ferrier in March to run the Baraka medical clinic, supported by Mission Waco. Nirla will bring with her many of the leadership skills and the community respect commanded by her father.

System of Rice Intensification (SRI)

Winter weather was unusually rainy through mid January, and some farmers in the Masak community along the eastern border of Ferrier, as well as smaller pockets elsewhere, were able to plant their rice early. However, the farmers organized by Eric Jean Baptist, who have set goals of planting larger SRI plots this year, spent much of January earning money by transplanting rice for Dominican farmers, and thus Eric is the only one who caught the chance to plant early.

The biggest hurdle to expanded SRI production continues to be the increased labor demand at transplanting time. Because tiny seedlings are transplanted just 8-12 days after seeding, the workers need to be much more meticulous than with the 4-6 week-old seedlings they are used to transplanting. Although they will undoubtedly increase in skill and efficiency, SRI transplanting currently takes roughly 5-7 times as much labor as traditional methods.

Some of this labor will be recouped by decreased labor for weeding and dramatically lowered costs of seed and fertilizer, and everyone recognizes that SRI plants are healthier and more productive. Nonetheless, the jury still seems to be out on whether the technique is a net benefit. These larger-scale



Eric Jean Baptist shows off this year's first SRI plot

plantings should help answer this question, and will be critical in establishing the potential of SRI in the Ferrier area. For this reason, we plan to follow them closely, and thoroughly document labor as well as purchased inputs and yield.

During our visit to the Artibonite Valley (see below), we hoped to glean further insights into SRI expansion, since SRI has been promoted much more widely in this area, and farmer education and support is much more abundant. Instead, what we encountered was numerous small, technician-implemented trials, but no farmer-managed SRI on the scale that farmers have achieved in Ferrier. While this experience bolstered the pride and confidence of our Ferrier extensionists, it was also sobering to see that Artibonite farmers struggle with the same constraints, and have no easy solutions to offer.

Ox Traction Project

Since my last trip, action has been taken to replace non-functioning oxen, and all participants now have decent working teams. Due to weather problems, last year's rice crop was quite poor for a good number of these farmers, however, and even those who had a good crop remain delinquent in their loan payment.



Ernest Mathieu's oxen plow in preparation for rice planting

After listening to their stories and concerns, Hudson Nelson, Jude Regis of GRADES, and I met and laid out a plan for next steps. Everyone recognizes that we have been extremely generous and lenient. Now is the time for firmness if the revolving fund is to function as a long-term benefit to the community. We will require a \$250 minimum payment in mid-March, then full first installment by June 15. GRADES will begin seizing the oxen of non-compliant members beginning with those we know had successful harvests last year. I was again impressed by the maturity and authority of 19-year-old Hudson Nelson through this process.

GRADES is currently working on a Government of Haiti contract to organize 100 ox teams throughout the north with the expectation that participants will only be asked to pay 50% of the cost. We discussed, and I will be encouraging, the possibility of refinancing the Ferrier loans under this project. In addition to greatly benefiting Ferrier farmers, refinancing would free up our revolving fund to take on other projects.

Agriculture Education

Francois Geffrard and Cleanne Nelson, teachers at the *Collège de l'Avenir de Ferrier (CAF)* have again taught students vegetable production by planting beds of mustard greens, carrots, and cabbage. The produce has been used to prepare school lunches, and this year each student was given several cabbage plants to take home and plant. Next month they will begin a tree nursery with the children, and they plan to continue timing their curriculum appropriately to the seasons.

The Technical Agriculture School of Ferrier (ETAF) has restarted with 13 first-year students and 14 second-year students. They continue to struggle financially, but ETAF Director, Rodmon Vincent is finding creative ways to remain solvent. He has combined several first and second-year classes so as to



ETAF students plant onion seedlings in school garden

save on teacher costs. Ilde and Hudson also stressed the importance of insisting that the students pay their fees on time.

Their biggest income source will soon be sales from a large vegetable garden the students have planted as part of their training. Students manage parcels in pairs, and despite the hard work of hand tillage and hand watering, they seem very enthusiastic, and enjoy competing between teams. Onions, peppers, cabbage, eggplant, leeks, and tomatoes will be divided with 40% of the harvest going to the CAF kitchen, 40% sold for ETAF &

20% given to students. Having been skeptical as to the viability of ETAF when Jackson began it a year ago, I am becoming more enthusiastic as I see the eagerness and commitment of both students and staff. While WHRI plans to continue supporting them financially, we need to keep this support at a level where they will continue to feel a significant level of local ownership.

Field Trip to Artibonite Valley

Haiti's Artibonite Valley is home to the largest irrigation scheme, and the most productive rice economy, in the country. It has also been the object of extensive investment and development projects. I was eager for Eric Jean Baptiste and Elisma Geffrard, our Ferrier SRI extensionists, to see and learn from the "big leagues," as well as to begin relationships that will serve as resources in the future.

We were hosted by the president of **RACPABA**, an association of seven farmer-cooperatives in the Artibonite. They seem well organized and resourced, but also very welcoming and approachable. We stayed at the home of Dieula Bienaimé, the RACPABA President, who lives in a rural community between Petit Rivière and Pont Sondé. Agronome Gesner, the head of their production unit, also spent time discussing production issues, and we visited both rice fields and the processing facilities where RACPABA mills and bags rice for sale in Port-au-Prince.

As anticipated, both parties seemed eager to begin a longer-term relationship. The Plaine de Maribareaux, of which Ferrier is part, is the second-largest irrigated area in the country, and although it is a relative backwater compared to the Artibonite, Ferrier farmers use varieties and technologies from the Dominican Republic that are not available elsewhere. Eric and Elisma went home with seed of a new rice variety, new ideas for rat control, and plans to host a group from the Artibonite in the coming year.