

Chiquita starts all over again in Honduras

BY SAUNDRA AMRHEIN
The Cincinnati Enquirer

LA LIMA, Honduras — Rows of dead banana trees that lined highways like waving scarecrows have been replaced by fields of coffee-colored soil, tilled and ready for new banana plants.

Chiquita Brands International is digging out from the muck left behind six months ago by Hurricane Mitch.

The Cincinnati-based company wrote off losses of \$73.6 million because of Mitch and lost nearly all of its production in Honduras, where it gets 15 percent of its bananas.

Despite the devastation, Chiquita officials say they are committed to keeping their business in Honduras.

"It is a three-year process and tens of millions of dollars," said Bob Kisting, president of the banana group. "We probably could have been better off starting someplace else. But we are starting all over again."

Now that many of the fields are clean and ready, replanting will begin in mid-May on 5,060 acres of land. Another 1,760 will be replanted by the end of the year. Harvesting can begin nine months later.

Before the hurricane, about 15,400 acres were in production. But the company likely will not be able to use all that land again.

"Some of the farms look like moonscapes," said Joe Hagin, Chiquita spokesman. "The fact is, there is a good deal of land, not just our own, that can't be brought back. It's just not possible."

All of the workers won't be brought back either. Chiquita let 1,200 temporary workers go and suspended 7,300 permanent workers after the hurricane.

But the company plans to introduce new technology that produces more bananas with fewer workers, Mr. Kisting said.



Within sight of damaged banana plants, Nolbia Pena and others work on a vegetable garden on a Chiquita farm near La Lima, Honduras. (Gary Landers photo) | [ZOOM](#) |

For now, the company helps some of its workers by lending them plots of land to grow fruit and vegetables to sell.

But Jesus Pineda, 28, is among two dozen workers growing chilis on a small plot of Chiquita property in La Lima. He worries that income from the vegetables won't be enough until he gets his job back in a packing plant.

"We're concerned about the end of the help. We don't have money, we don't have anything."