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Coffee companies feel tsunami's sting

By Leslie Wright
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Thomas Fricke's phone rang in his Marlboro home at 7 a.m., unusually early for a Sunday morning, and the day after Christmas at that. The voice on the line was an employee of Fricke's in Holland.

"There's been an earthquake and tsunami in Aceh," Fricke recalled the voice on the line saying.

On Dec. 26, while most of the world was learning about Aceh province in Indonesia for the first time, Fricke already knew the area well. His company, ForesTrade, started a cooperative for organic coffee farmers in the province in 1997.

"To us, that's a household word," Fricke said of the province. "To most people, Aceh is unknown."

Aceh has been thrust into the spotlight as one of the locales hardest hit by the earthquake and tsunami that ravaged Asia last month. The disaster killed an estimated 150,000 people, a number that continues to rise, and left 5 million in need.

The news that Sunday morning triggered a cascade of phone calls to Fricke's home from concerned business colleagues and friends looking for any information about the natural disaster. Through ForesTrade, several Vermont businesses have ties to the remote and strife-ridden area on the northern tip of the Indonesian island of Sumatra.

"Vermont is unique in the nation for coffee and its connection to Sumatra," said Paul Ralston, owner of Vermont Coffee Co. in Bristol, who uses Sumatran coffee from Aceh in a number of his blends.

Damage

After Fricke's early-morning phone call Dec. 26, he immediately tried to reach ForesTrade's Indonesian office. The company has 75 employees in Indonesia — all of them Indonesian — with three based in Aceh.

By the time Fricke made his call, it was evening in Indonesia and several of the staff had dispersed for late-year vacations. It took days to locate everyone.

ForesTrade, based in Brattleboro, is the largest supplier of organic tropical spices in the world and supplies 15 percent of the Fair Trade coffee sold in the United States. Buyers pay a premium for coffee labeled Fair Trade because it is grown under sustainable practices. ForesTrade imported 1,800 tons of coffee last year and more than 1,000 tons

of products including cinnamon, cloves, black pepper, ginger and turmeric. The company's customers include three Vermont coffee companies — Green Mountain Coffee Roasters in Waterbury, Vermont Coffee Co. in Bristol and Vermont Artisan Coffee & Tea Co. in Waterbury.

Though all of the ForesTrade employees were OK, the coffee farmers had not fared as well. Thirteen of the farmers' children who attend school in the lowlands are missing, Fricke said. Damage to homes and buildings has forced some families to live in coffee warehouses, he said.

Of all of the Indonesian locations where ForesTrade does business, the coffee-growing operation in Aceh appears to be the most affected by the disaster, Fricke said.

"Early indications are that the damage was fairly severe to people's homes and mosques and public facilities. A fair amount of damage to roads with landslides, and bridges damaged. It doesn't appear in relative terms that that damage is irreparable," he said.

Regrouping

Fricke and Sylvia Blancet, company co-founder and Fricke's wife, are scheduled to leave for Indonesia today.

They have been advised to stay away from the devastated province of Aceh and plan to meet with ForesTrade employees outside that area to develop short- and long-term plans for recovery. Blancet, who will stay in Indonesia for several months, plans to travel to Takengon in the highlands of Aceh later in her stay, and visit the organic coffee cooperative that does business with ForesTrade.

Fricke was last in Aceh in March 2003, when he led a group of clients to the coffee cooperative on a visit dubbed The Make Coffee Not War Tour. He took advantage of what turned out to be a short-lived international peace accord that quieted civil conflict in the area for about six months.

The cooperative started in 1997 with 100 farmers in two villages and has grown to almost 2,000 farmers in 32 communities. The growers participate in a fair trade program in which buyers pay a premium for their crops, knowing that they are grown according to the principles of sustainable farming.

Green Mountain Coffee Roasters contributed \$15,000 to help start the cooperative and buys eight or nine shipping containers of coffee from the cooperative annually, as much as 169 tons, or nearly 10 percent, of the cooperative's annual crop.

Vermont Coffee Co. and Vermont Artisan Coffee & Tea Co. buy much smaller amounts, but owners of both companies said the Sumatran coffee they get through ForesTrade is key to the blends they make. Sumatran coffee has a unique flavor unmatched anywhere else in the world, Ralston said.

Mane Alves, owner of Vermont Artisan Coffee & Tea, agreed.

"Unless I really cannot get it, I will buy Sumatran coffee," Alves said. Alves plays another role in the Aceh area as a coffee growing consultant with his other company, Coffee Lab International. He helps coffee growers run more efficient operations and has decided not to charge for his next visit to the region.

'We'll be there'

Fricke is not sure what he will find in Indonesia, but he is determined to do whatever is needed to get the cooperative back on its feet. Resuming commerce is one way to help the Indonesians recover from the unspeakable disaster they've suffered, he said.

From what he's heard, the coffee crop, which is in the first part of its nine-month harvest season, is undamaged.

The challenge will be getting the coffee out of the country. The main port from where the coffee is typically shipped is functioning, but is clogged with shipments pertaining to the relief effort because the other main port at Banda Aceh was destroyed, Fricke said.

That means he might have to come up with alternative ports in different parts of the country. Coffee would then have to be transported farther, which will cost more money. Shipments may be delayed for a time.

"We'll just have to work with our customers to accommodate higher shipping costs, if need be," Fricke said. "It's going to be slower, but eventually we expect that by March we should be able to be in full operation."

For the short term, Green Mountain Coffee won't be affected, company spokesman Rick Peyser said. A container of the cooperative's coffee was already at sea headed to the United States when the disaster struck, he said.

Ralston, of Vermont Coffee Co., said he is prepared to make do until the market returns to normal. He uses the cooperative's coffee in four of the eight blends that he makes.

"We'll communicate with our customers that a key ingredient in their coffee is wrapped up in this human disaster," Ralston said. "We all feel for them and hope for the best for them. When they come out the other side, and they will, we'll be there."