

Sun Journal

A bid to stop cocaine at the soil

■ **Farmers:** In Peru, the United States is pouring money into programs designed to make legal crops more attractive to growers than the lucrative coca plant.

By TIFFANY WOODS
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APURIMAC RIVER, Peru — The dirt road ends, or seems to end, in a mud-bogged curve that threatens to devour the four-wheel-drive car. "No farther," the driver protests.

But in its dusty way the road continues through the Apurimac River Valley, one of Peru's largest coca-producing areas, and two hours later you reach the village of Palma Pampa.

Everything — not just the car — is riding on the repair of that road.

If the road is repaired, farmers can drive their products directly to market instead of relying on river transport. If the road is repaired, law enforcement agencies can police the valley.

And the governments of Peru and the United States may learn whether improvements in infrastructure and agriculture can help reduce the production of coca, whose leaves are the raw material of cocaine.

The road project is part of a five-year, \$44 million program between the United States and Peru that is trying to cut coca production by building roads, providing seeds for alternative crops and giving farmers title to their land, which may allow them to weather bad years.

In 1995, the program paid for repairs to nearly 200 miles of farm-to-market roads and produced titles to about 3,000 parcels of land.

This is "alternative" development — improvements made acre by acre, mile by mile, changes in the countryside rather than in a country's central bank or in the Cabinet. Supporters consider this the best way to fight drug trafficking because it tries to give farmers more choices. There has usually



AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE

Inspection tour: Waiting to board a helicopter for a coca-producing regions in the Peruvian mountains this week are Peru's President Alberto K. Fujimori (pointing), U.S. drug czar Barry McCaffrey (second from right), his adviser Steve Donehoe (right) and U.S. Ambassador Denis Jett.

been only one — poverty or the planting of another coca crop.

About 200,000 families grow coca, making Peru the world's largest producer, followed by Bolivia and Colombia. Finding viable alternatives has not been easy because few other products will bring as high a price.

"You cannot talk about reduction of coca leaf without talking about poverty," says Jakob Simonsen, a United Nations official here.

"It's a very slow process of turning these things around because you are working with schemes of production and peasants that have been producing these ways for many years," Simonsen says.

"In order to be successful with these programs, you cannot just go in with a quick solution or repression. It is an integrated packet. But it is ... slow."

Most of the \$44 million for alternative development is coming

from the United States, not Peru, which Washington has criticized for not doing more to promote the program.

Retired Army Gen. Barry McCaffrey, the U.S. drug czar, announced this week a grant of \$14 million more, money that Peruvian President Alberto K. Fujimori says will be used to buy airplanes, boats and communications equipment.

"We have to have Peru's campesinos [peasants] stop growing coca," McCaffrey said. "We have to work against the source."

If Peru provides a strategy, he said, the United States will provide the necessary resources.

If the United States and other countries want to help Peru solve the drug problem, Peru's defenders say, those countries need to eliminate subsidies on basic products such as corn and rice. If agricultural products were not subsidized abroad, they say, Peru could

market those crops.

In the meantime, farmers say the alternative development programs get bogged down in bureaucracy.

"They give you the seeds, and they forget about you," says Juan Reymundo Navarro, a community leader involved in coca production. "They don't give you anything for maintenance, fumigation or cleaning."

About 300 farmers who were involved in a program that substituted cabbage palms for coca have returned to growing coca, he says, because there was no market for the cabbage palms.

In the Apurimac River Valley, organizers are considering soybeans, papayas and bananas to take coca's place. They are also hoping to cultivate silkworms and use the worms' excrement for fertilizer and fuel.

"We have recovered a little of our credibility," says Ernesto Molina Chavez, the engineer who is executive director of the project. "But we have to give them more."

"The drug traffickers come at night and offer the land owners \$100 to clean their land for coca production," he says. "The peasants really do want to change, but they go where the money is. We can't offer them that."

