

Purdue University will support the development of the Orinoquía

Government seals agreement with USA University. A professor from the entity speaks.

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Foto: Milton Díaz / EL TIEMPO

Suresh V. Garimella, vicepresidente ejecutivo de Investigación y Alianzas y profesor de Ing...

Suresh V. Garimella, executive vice president for Research and Partnership and professor of Mechanical Engineering from Purdue University (USA).

Government representatives, business leaders and directors of USA Purdue University sealed an agreement on Tuesday that will boost the development of the Colombian Orinoquía. Purdue's role will provide its expertise in science and research to gather insight about the region's problems and design solutions for it.

Suresh Garimella, Vice President of Research and Partnerships and Professor of Mechanical Engineering at Purdue, spoke with *EL TIEMPO* about the contribution they will provide for the development of the Orinoquía Master Plan.

How does the University become part of the Orinoquía project?

It has been a joint effort. On one hand, there is Purdue's interest in contributing what we know how to do, and on the other hand, the government and the private sector inviting us to show our knowledge not only in applied research, but making it real.

How much progress has there been since the alliance [partnership] was proposed?

The invitation was made in January 2014 and, although three years have passed, the truth is that a lot of work has been done with respect to the definition of the plan. A partnership of this nature that has such a

large spectrum of action is not easy and requires definitions on how it will work, who is going to create it, how it will be controlled, and what the results will be; this time has been used to clarify many of these aspects.

What potential does the university see in the region?

The Orinoquía is a region blessed with many natural resources that are not evenly distributed throughout the territory. There are the high plains, lands and valley that flood, there is timber potential and, above all, great water resources.

How can we make people see that potential and guide them to recognize these advantages?

It is important to know that there are solutions available, but they cannot be imposed on the people by the central government or by any other sector. In the center of all this is education; if there is no training and education you cannot do these things, therefore they must be brought to the regions, this cannot be done in the cities, it is necessary to involve the people from those areas.

Will there be pilot programs before starting the specific plan?

Purdue already has clarity about what pilot programs can be initiated for processing the land, but if from the beginning we propose what we have, there will be resistance. The methodology is to work with communities, allies (National Planning, Corpoica, Colombian universities) and allow them to point out what the working axes may be, then Purdue can present its proposals.

How can the business sector tie into this large project?

It is important first, to build confidence and know that neither the government nor the academy alone can move an initiative of this size forward, there must also be business participation to build together; if this mutual support is not there, this cannot flourish. The people of the regions and the country in general should want and believe in this development, it's the only way to achieve objectives.

How much time will this initiative imply?

It is complex to know. What we have proposed is a ten-year time span to plan, execute and deliver results. I am not fond of 50 year plans because we will neither be here and we will not know what the circumstances then will be.

How do you imagine the Orinoquía in 20 years?

The dream is that we will have tried various science led experiments and that there will be more successes than failures so they can become the engine for new developments. There is much potential in the region and the country; my dream is irrelevant, this must be the dream of all Colombians.

The Master Plan for the development of the Orinoquía takes off.

Government signed an agreement with the research center of the University of Purdue, in the United States.

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Photo: Private Archive

During the signing of the agreement, the National Planning Director, Simon Gaviria and Suresh V. Garimella from Purdue University (USA), were accompanied by several attendees.

The Colombian government, Purdue University (Research Center in the United States) and the School of Public Administration (ESAP) signed an agreement that will initiate the Master Plan for the development of the Orinoquía.

This agreement with the technical support of the National Planning Department, seeks to implement 8 pilot projects: 5 in agriculture and 3 in tourism for the Orinoquía region. (See also: Purdue University will support the development of the Orinoco). In this 15.1 million hectares area that is suitable for agriculture, there are huge backlogs in infrastructure and social services.

During the signing of the agreement, Suresh V. Garimella, Executive Vice President for Research and Partnerships of Purdue University (USA) said his institution has extensive world experience in the development of agriculture and tourism. "Purdue University has experience and development in areas such as engineering, agriculture, anthropology and a holistic view of the problems that exist in the world," said the academic.

For agriculture and tourism

In the same sense, businessman Luis Carlos Sarmiento Angulo, who attended the signing ceremony, said that with Purdue University Colombia will have the highest quality assesment. "This region needs everything: roads, airports, aqueducts that represents new jobs for people, land to cultivate, new businesses; this is truly an extraordinary thing," said the businessman.

Claudia Marcela Franco, Director of the ESAP, showed her optimism. "I am sure that we will achieve this, this project related to the development of the agricultural and tourism sectors is so important, they are two potentialities for the region."

And the director of National Planning, Simon Gaviria said: "It would be great if in 50 years we can say that Purdue helped us find the Colombian Orinoquía potential that we all knew was there, but that we had not been able to develop.

The agreement will have resources for more than 4,000 million pesos and its first results are expected in late 2017. The sum of institutional efforts is one of the aspects that will ensure the achievement of expectations. The confluence of the experience of ESAP, along with that of Purdue University that has developed several similar initiatives in other countries in Latin America, Africa and Asia, are reasons to expect the best results for the Orinoquía region.

As a matter of fact, Purdue University has a history of supporting development in Colombia, like the Farmer to Farmer program that it has in partnership with USAID and is focused on the development of small and medium farming enterprises and the 'Cacao for Peace' initiative.

On this occasion, it is expected that they create tools to be used by the private sector, government and social agencies to determine the feasibility of specific development plans for the Orinoquía region.

Another objective is to improve the health and welfare of the region by way of their economic growth.