

Idaho farmers and ranchers visit Puerto Rico to attend AFBF's annual convention: Island still recovering after hurricane

By Paige Nelson

For Idaho Farm Bureau Federation

On Sept. 20, 2017, Hurricane Maria, a Category 4 storm, devastated the entire Caribbean Island of Puerto Rico.

With winds more than 100 miles per hour and sheets of rain, Puerto Rico's power grid and much of its infrastructure didn't stand a chance.

It is estimated that 80% of the island's agriculture was destroyed.

Overall estimated losses amounted to \$90 billion, and Maria killed an estimated 2,900 people either as a direct result of the storm or during the subsequent suffering caused by lack of power, water and infrastructure for months afterward.

In the aftermath of Maria's devastation and with hope for the future, the American Farm Bureau Federation announced it would host its 104th annual convention on the island.

With less than five years to prepare for thousands of visitors, as well as get themselves and their businesses back on their feet, Puerto Ricans had their work cut out for them.

Justin Patten, vice president of operations for Idaho Farm Bureau Federation, shouldered the responsibility of planning the Idaho delegation's trip and stay in Puerto Rico during AFBF's 2023 annual convention, which was held Jan. 4-10.

Around 100 Idaho Farm Bureau Federation members attended the convention and were treated to a private tour of the island

Jan. 5.

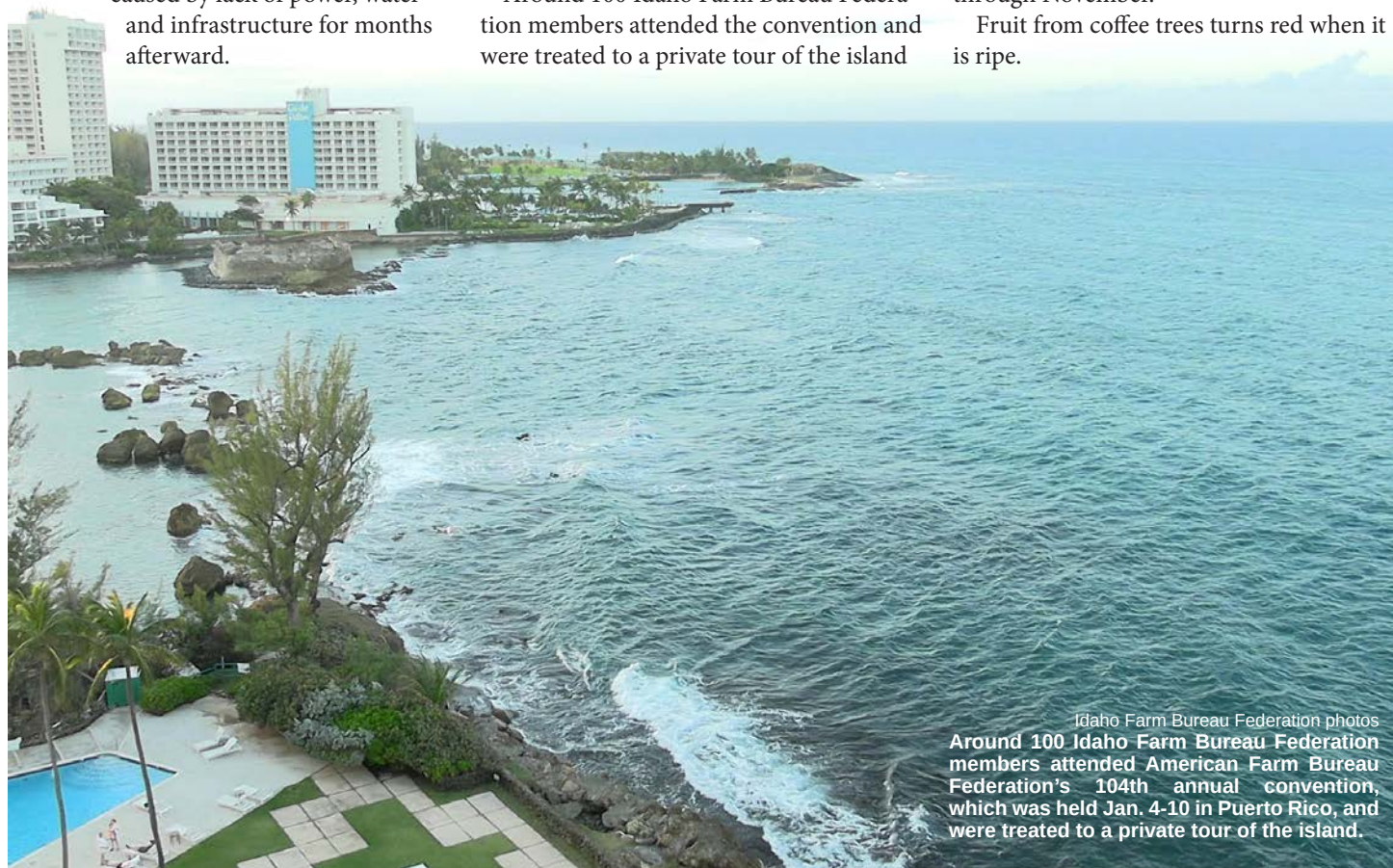
The first stop was Hacienda Muñoz, a specialty coffee plantation in San Lorenzo. In 2022, Hacienda was named the third best specialty coffee on the island.

The plantation operates on 30 acres and grows coffee, chocolate, lemons, pineapples and papayas. They are farm-to-cup and roast their coffee beans as they sell them.

Fernanda Pacheco, director of tourism, guided the tour.

As Fernanda Pacheco led the group around his coffee plantation, he explained the process of producing coffee. The growing season is from February through September and harvest takes place September through November.

Fruit from coffee trees turns red when it is ripe.



Idaho Farm Bureau Federation photos
Around 100 Idaho Farm Bureau Federation members attended American Farm Bureau Federation's 104th annual convention, which was held Jan. 4-10 in Puerto Rico, and were treated to a private tour of the island.



Everything is picked by hand, so the trees are kept short for ease of picking. The beans' flavor is greatly influenced by the soil, so maintaining enough space between trees and rich soil is critical. According to Pacheco, 500 pounds of coffee grapes (the red fruit) makes 90 pounds of ground coffee.

Once picked, the grapes are put through a washing and brushing process to remove the outer hull. The coffee beans are then dried in the sun. In a place that rains every day, this can be tricky.

The drying tables are moved under shelter before each rain-storm to prevent mold growth.

Hacienda roasts its green coffee beans as it has demand for them. During the roasting

process, the beans lose an additional 20% of their weight.

Pacheco joked that he uses a flame thrower to roast his beans. One crack on the bean and it's done; two cracks and it's burned.

The next tour stop was across the island in Santa Isabel at Finca Don Manuel, a tropical fruit farm specializing in plantains, papayas, pineapples and pumpkins on 320 acres.

TOP: Idaho Farm Bureau Federation members are shown touring a coffee plantation Jan. 5 during American Farm Bureau Federation's 104th annual convention, which was held in Puerto Rico.

RIGHT: During American Farm Bureau Federation's 104th annual convention, which was held Jan. 4-10 in Puerto Rico, members of Idaho Farm Bureau Federation toured this coffee plantation.





This is a group photo of Idaho Farm Bureau Federation members who attended American Farm Bureau Federation's 104th annual convention, which was held Jan. 4-10 in Puerto Rico.

Fernando Manuel Machado, farm owner and Bernardo Benetti, chief operating officer, discussed the task of growing fruit as their captive audiences toured the farm in hay wagons pulled by New Holland tractors.

Machado maintains 13 employees and rotates his ground between the four crops. Interestingly, there are no seasons by which his crops grow, but rather time intervals. Pumpkins are simply used to clear pests and rest the ground between fruit crops.

For example, Field A is planted to:

- plantains — harvest 12 months later,
- pumpkins — harvest four months later,
- pineapples — harvest 15 months later,
- pumpkins — four months,
- papaya — harvest 12 months later,
- pumpkins — four months.

The farm's No. 1 crop is plantain, which in Puerto Rican cuisine is used similar to potatoes. To end the tour, Machado and Benetti treated their tour groups to fresh coconuts and an up-close view of one of the farm's 44 windmills.

To cap off the island tour, attendees

took a night swim in a bioluminescent bay located in Lajas, the southwestern corner of Puerto Rico.

Microscopic, single-celled organisms called dinoflagellates produce a glow-in-the-dark effect as a predatory defense response to movement in the water.

Seeing blue-green water light up around your hands and feet was the ultimate thrill.

During the rest of the conference, Idaho attendees were on their own to enjoy the island and attend the 104th annual con-

vention of the American Farm Bureau Federation.

A few highlights from the convention included an Excellence in Agriculture presentation by Chase and Lacey Neilson from Lost Rivers County Farm Bureau, Andrew Mickelsen from Bonneville County earning a spot in the top 10 Achiever Award competition, and Jaysa Fillmore competing in the sweet 16 round of the Discussion Meet.

Jason Fellows of Franklin County, a member of IFBF's board of directors and also a member of AFBF's Partners in Advocacy Leadership program, said that overall, the value of attending AFBF's annual convention comes in the form of relationships.

"The benefit is definitely the relationships we develop from people within our state and from other states," he said. "Relationships can build a foundation for other things in agriculture because we're all fighting some of the same things and knowing somebody that's going through something similar helps us to see a different viewpoint, and maybe that's all we needed was a different pair of eyes."

The 105th annual AFBF convention will be hosted in Salt Lake City in January 2024. ■

Paige Nelson is a farmer from Rigby and member of the Jefferson County Farm Bureau board of directors.



RIGHT: Idaho Farm Bureau Federation members look at coffee beans during a tour of a coffee plantation in Puerto Rico Jan. 5. They were there to attend American Farm Bureau Federation's 104th annual convention.