

A close-up photograph showing three hands holding coffee-related items. One hand holds a white cup with a latte art design, another holds a black coffee grinder, and a third hand is partially visible. The background is blurred, focusing on the coffee-making process.

Hurricane María and the Puerto Rico Coffee Recovery (2017-2022)



Hurricane María made landfall in Puerto Rico on September 20, 2017, causing the most catastrophic damage in the island's coffee history — destroying approximately 80 percent of Puerto Rico's coffee trees, generating losses of \$85 million for the industry, and setting back production by a generation. The five-year recovery effort that followed, led by Hispanic Federation's seedling distribution,

TechnoServe's technical assistance, Nespresso's market partnership, and World Coffee Research's variety support, rebuilt the industry to roughly pre-storm production levels by 2022 — only for Hurricane Fiona to strike in September 2022 and force a second recovery cycle. For understanding how Caribbean coffee industries survive catastrophic climate events, and for tracking the resilience of Puerto Rico's coffee community, the María recovery is a landmark case study.

The Storm

Hurricane María struck Puerto Rico as a Category 4 storm with sustained winds up to 155 miles per hour, moving across the island diagonally from southeast to northwest and passing directly over the Cordillera Central where the coffee industry concentrates. The hurricane's track placed it in the worst possible position for coffee damage — the storm's eye and its strongest winds crossed every major coffee-producing municipality in sequence, sustaining destructive force through the mountainous terrain where coffee grows.

The Coffee Encyclopedia



*Hurricane Maria Puerto Rico 2017 map showing storm
track across Cordillera Central coffee region*

Image curation pending

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Winds tore coffee trees from their roots, stripped leaves from surviving trees, destroyed processing infrastructure, and collapsed roads that farmers needed to reach their farms. Rainfall totaled over 30 inches in some mountain areas, causing landslides that buried entire farms. Electrical service failed across the island, with some coffee municipalities remaining without power for over 8 months. Water supplies were disrupted, communication systems broke down, and the agricultural extension services that farmers depended on were themselves coping with storm damage.

The Scale of Coffee Destruction

Approximately 80 percent of Puerto Rico's coffee trees were destroyed or severely damaged by Hurricane María. This figure, widely cited in industry sources, represents the physical loss — trees uprooted or rendered unproductive by the storm. The economic impact extended beyond tree loss to include destroyed processing equipment, damaged storage facilities, lost current-season harvest, and reduced future-season production from the surviving trees that required recovery time before returning to normal yields.



Industry economic losses were estimated at \$85 million for the coffee sector specifically, a significant portion of the broader \$780 million agricultural sector losses from the storm. For farming families that depended on coffee income, the losses were often total — entire farms reduced to damaged stumps, infrastructure destroyed, and no immediate income path available during the extended recovery period. Some farmers abandoned coffee production permanently following the storm, unable to rebuild given the economic and physical demands of restoration.

Individual Farmer Stories

The abstract statistics obscure the individual human dimensions of María's impact. Maritza López, a coffee farmer in one of the central mountain municipalities, remembered her post-storm farm: "On the farm, we didn't have anything left. There was only one coffee tree left standing. María took everything. It was hard to start all over

again; there were dark times." Her experience was representative — farms reduced from productive operations to nearly bare ground in a single night.



Vanessa Arroyo Sánchez and her husband Miguel Ángel Torres Díaz had spent nine years building their Jayuya coffee farm — planting 18 hectares, establishing a coffee seedling nursery, carrying forward the coffee tradition from her father's family. Hurricane María wiped out half of their coffee acreage in a single night. These stories multiplied across hundreds of Puerto Rican coffee farms, each representing years or decades of accumulated family work reduced to wreckage in a single storm.

Hispanic Federation Seedling Distribution

The first large-scale recovery response came from Hispanic Federation, a Latino civic organization that launched a coffee seedling distribution program shortly after the hurricane. The program's goal was to replace the destroyed coffee trees with new seedlings, primarily rust-resistant varieties including Limaní, Frontón, and imported

hybrids that could perform well in Puerto Rico's changing climate. Over the course of the recovery period, Hispanic Federation distributed approximately 2 million coffee seedlings to Puerto Rican farmers.



Seedling distribution alone would not have restored production — seedlings require 3-5 years to begin producing cherries and longer to reach full yield. But the program provided the critical foundation for recovery, giving farmers the planting stock needed to rebuild without requiring each farm to source its own seedlings in a market where seedling demand vastly exceeded supply. Hispanic Federation's distribution operated through cooperatives, municipal offices, and direct farmer outreach, reaching hundreds of farms across the coffee-producing regions.

<https://www.youtube.com/embed/Wg4t7h09dnk>

Watch: 'We Still Here' — documentary on grassroots Hurricane María recovery efforts in Puerto Rico

TechnoServe Technical Assistance

TechnoServe, an international agricultural development organization, partnered with Nespresso to provide technical assistance to Puerto Rican coffee farmers during the recovery. The program, which has reached 521 farmers through group training, one-on-one sessions, and digital education, focused on agronomic practices that would maximize the productivity and quality of the new trees being planted. Training topics included variety selection, shade tree integration, disease management, harvest timing, and post-harvest processing.



COVID-19 in 2020 disrupted in-person training, and TechnoServe shifted to remote training through Facebook, WhatsApp, and YouTube video content. This adaptation kept farmer engagement active during the pandemic period when physical gatherings were impossible. By 2022, in-person training had resumed with strict safety protocols, and the combination of digital and physical training became the program's standard approach going forward.

The Nespresso and World Coffee Research Partnerships

Nespresso's role in the recovery combined corporate commitment with practical market access. The company pledged long-term purchase relationships for Puerto Rican specialty coffee, providing farmers with confidence that investment in quality rebuild would be rewarded with guaranteed market outlets. World Coffee Research contributed scientific expertise on variety selection, disease management, and climate-adaptive practices. The partnership structure — philanthropic seedling distribution, technical training, market commitment, and research support — provided comprehensive backing that isolated individual initiatives could not have matched.



For farmers, the partnership meant that the coffee they were replanting had guaranteed buyers, scientifically-informed variety recommendations, and training in how to grow it successfully. For the sponsors, the partnership meant continued access to a specialty coffee origin with cultural significance and quality potential. The partnership model — designed specifically for post-disaster recovery — has become a reference case for how coffee industries can recover from catastrophic climate events.

The Recovery Trajectory

Puerto Rico coffee production rebuilt gradually from 2017 through 2022. New trees planted in the immediate post-María period began producing in 2020-2021. Processing infrastructure was rebuilt with improved storm-resilient design. Marketing relationships were restored with domestic Puerto Rican consumers and specialty international buyers. By the 2022 harvest season, the industry was approaching pre-María production levels with a varietal mix shifted toward rust-resistant hybrids and farming practices informed by TechnoServe's training.

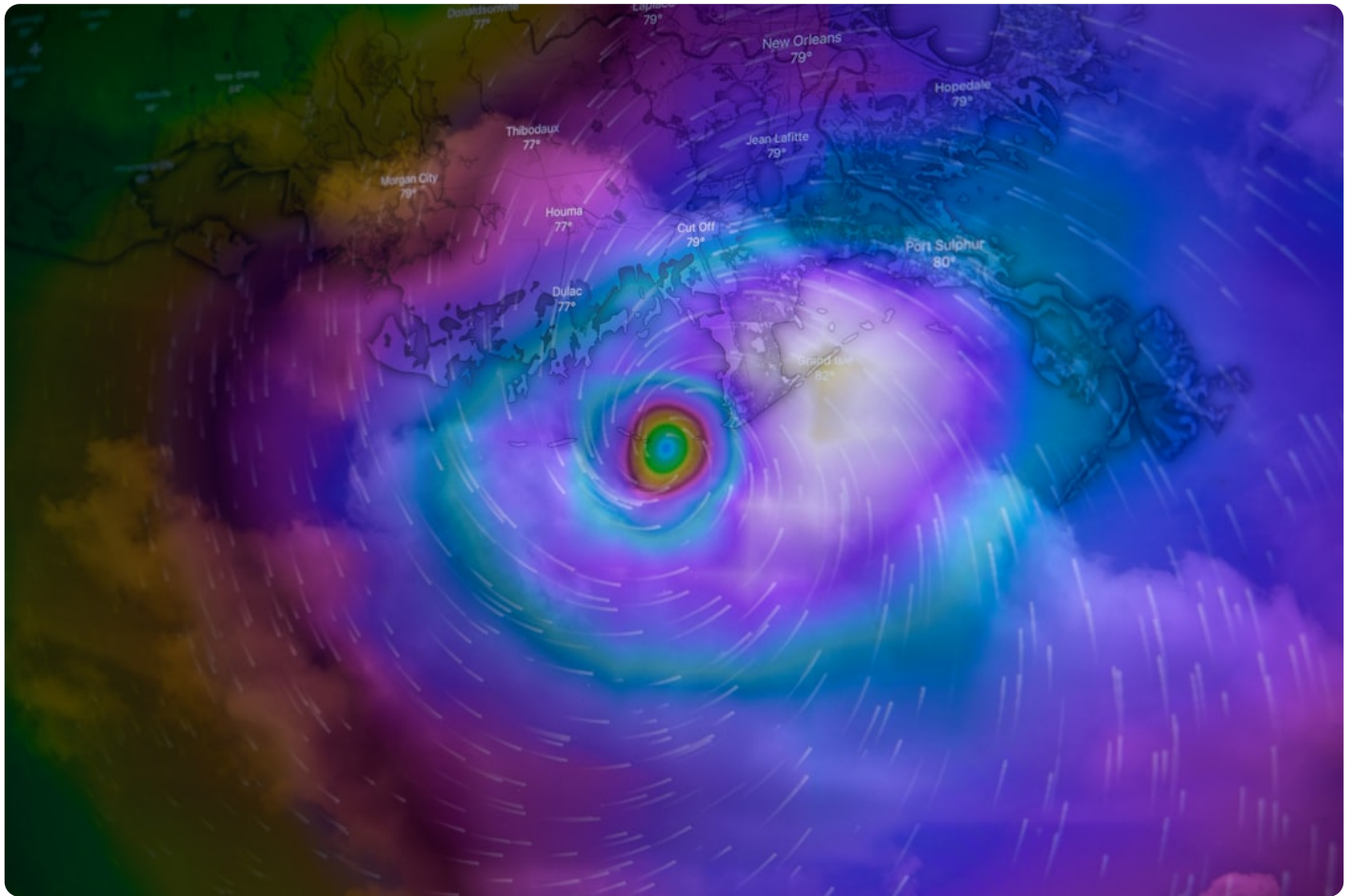


Individual farm recovery varied substantially. Some farms returned to or exceeded pre-María production. Others recovered partially but never reached previous levels. Some farms were abandoned permanently, their land converted to other uses or left fallow. The recovery demonstrated both the resilience of Puerto Rican coffee as an industry and the vulnerability of individual farmers whose personal economic situations could not withstand the extended recovery periods required.

Hurricane Fiona 2022 — The Second Blow

On September 18, 2022 — almost exactly five years after Hurricane María — Hurricane Fiona made landfall in Puerto Rico, causing catastrophic flooding and additional damage to coffee farms that had just rebuilt from the previous storm. The 2022 harvest,

which had been on track to exceed pre-María production, was substantially damaged. Some farmers who had invested their savings in post-María rebuilding faced a second round of losses before the first rebuild had fully paid back.



Recovery from Hurricane Fiona built on the structures established during the María recovery. TechnoServe's technical assistance continued. Hispanic Federation's seedling distribution resumed. Nespresso's market commitment persisted. The repeated storm impact highlighted that Puerto Rican coffee faces ongoing climate-intensified storm frequency, not a one-time catastrophic event, and that recovery systems must be designed for repeated use rather than single disasters.

Lessons from the Recovery

The María recovery produced lessons that apply beyond Puerto Rico. Coordinated partnership among philanthropic, technical, commercial, and research organizations accomplishes what any single actor cannot. Variety selection toward climate-resilient options provides longer-term protection than rebuilding with pre-storm varieties. Farmer training during recovery builds capacity that survives future storms. Market commitments during rebuilding give farmers confidence to invest in quality restoration.



These lessons now inform coffee industry responses to hurricane impacts across the Caribbean and Latin America, to climate-related crises beyond hurricanes, and to policy discussions about agricultural resilience in climate-vulnerable regions. Puerto Rico's recovery from María became a case study that researchers, policymakers, and industry organizations continue to examine and build on.

Why This History Matters

The María recovery matters because it demonstrates both what Puerto Rican coffee can survive and what it requires to survive. The industry rebuilt from 80 percent tree loss within five years through coordinated effort — a remarkable demonstration of resilience. But the rebuild required sustained external support that small farms could not have mustered alone, and the 2022 Fiona impact showed that resilience must be ongoing rather than one-time.



For consumers, understanding the María recovery changes how Puerto Rican coffee is understood. When drinking Puerto Rican coffee today, the cup represents not just agriculture but active rebuilding — farms that have been through catastrophe and returned, supported by communities and partnerships that made return possible. Supporting Puerto Rican coffee means participating in an ongoing recovery that continues as long as climate-intensified storms continue threatening the industry.

Key Facts — Hurricane María Coffee Impact

- Landfall: September 20, 2017 as Category 4 hurricane
- Storm track: Southeast to northwest across Cordillera Central
- Coffee trees destroyed: approximately 80 percent of Puerto Rico's coffee
- Industry losses: approximately \$85 million specifically for coffee
- Broader agricultural losses: approximately \$780 million
- Electrical outage duration: over 8 months in some coffee areas
- Primary response organization: Hispanic Federation (2 million seedlings distributed)
- Technical assistance: TechnoServe with Nespresso partnership
- Research support: World Coffee Research
- Second storm: Hurricane Fiona September 18, 2022

Frequently Asked Questions

Why was Hurricane María so devastating for Puerto Rican coffee specifically? The storm's track crossed every major coffee-producing region in the Cordillera Central, sustaining Category 4 winds through the mountainous terrain. Coffee trees, which grow in exposed mountain positions, were particularly vulnerable. Combined with damaged processing infrastructure and extended power outages, the industry lost most of its productive capacity in a single storm.

How long did recovery take? The basic coffee recovery — replanting trees that would reach productive age — took approximately 3-5 years from storm to first significant harvest. Full industry rebuilding including processing infrastructure, market relationships, and new variety integration took approximately 5 years from María to near-pre-storm production, completing in approximately 2022.

What role did Hispanic Federation play? Hispanic Federation distributed approximately 2 million coffee seedlings to Puerto Rican farmers during the María recovery period, providing the planting stock needed to rebuild without requiring farms

to individually source seedlings in a market of vast scarcity. The distribution prioritized rust-resistant varieties suited to changing climate conditions.

Did Puerto Rico's coffee industry fully recover from María before Fiona? By 2022, the industry was on track to exceed pre-María production levels, demonstrating substantial recovery. Hurricane Fiona in September 2022 caused additional damage before the recovery fully completed, requiring a second recovery cycle building on the infrastructure and varieties established during the María rebuild.

What varieties were most commonly planted during María recovery? Rust-resistant varieties including Limaní and Frontón were prioritized, along with newer international hybrids like Marsellesa and H1 Centroamericano being tested for Puerto Rican conditions. Traditional Typica and Bourbon persisted on some heritage farms but represented a smaller portion of replanting than pre-storm composition.

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