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Hershey Foods joins in U.S.
cocoa bean farm

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Hershey Foods Corp., in a joint venture, is establishing the first cocoa bean farm in the United States.

Not in California. Not in Florida. Certainly not in Pennsylvania.

It's in Hawaii.

"It's a small project, by Hershey standards, but we feel it's important in its uniqueness," says B.K. Matlick, director of Hershey's agribusiness department.

Participants in the joint venture are Kakela Enterprises Inc., a privately held investment development company; Amfac Hawaii Inc., a sugar producer, and Hummingbird Hershey Ltd., a wholly owned subsidiary of Hershey Foods.

The idea is not to replace or complement the sources of Hershey's cocoa, Matlick said. If successful, "it won't be a significant factor in our cocoa supply."

Most of the world's cocoa is grown in West Africa, with the Ivory Coast the largest producer.

Matlick said the concept to grow beans in Hawaii came from Kakela Enterprises,

led by entrepreneur and managing partner Jim Walsh, and Amfac Hawaii Inc. They approached Hershey with an idea toward boosting the economy of Hawaii.

"This will be an alternative to the sugar industry which has been hit by the use of artificial sweeteners and corn syrup. Companies there have been looking for alternative crops to plant on the slopes. This is only one of many they're trying. Others are coffee, spices and alfalfa," Matlick said.

In the first of three phases, Hershey now has 400 acres in test farms on the islands of Hawaii and Maui. Plans call for other cocoa crops on the island of Kauai.

The goal is to produce cocoa beans commercially by late 1988 or in 1989.

If the venture proves economically feasible, Hershey eventually will have 15,000 to 20,000 acres of crops, Matlick said. However, that acreage "would produce only 15,000 tons in a world supply of 2 million tons."

"That small source of cocoa," he said, "would be a boost to Hawaii's economy in that eventually employment in the venture would reach 500 to 800 — if antici-

pated successes are achieved."

"We are providing the technology, not capital," he said. Hershey filled the requirement for "technical agricultural expertise" the other two companies were seeking.

"We have a shade crop in now," Matlick said, explaining that cocoa grows best in shade, under shadow of trees. "We're now planting the seedlings for cocoa. It'll be 24 to 30 months before we will [harvest] a crop."

The area has "a lot of things going for it," Matlick said. "There are good soils, sunshine, 25 inches of rain a year."

Site selection was important because of "climatic changes even within any one island."

Too much rain can be a problem, so Hershey is using a method called drip irrigation. This was developed by the Israelis, he said, in their efforts to grow fruit on desert land. "It uses a smaller amount of water — concentrated where it is needed." Also used is liquid fertilizer in irrigating the crops.

Cocoa pods are 6 to 10 inches long. Inside a pod can be found 35 to 50 beans, each the size of a lima bean. It takes 10 to

12 pods to make a pound of dry cocoa.

The plan is not for those beans to wind up as processed chocolate in Hershey bars or Kisses or any of the other Hershey products.

Matlick said Hershey eventually hopes to produce what he described as a "value-added product" in Hawaii.

"Tourists go to Hawaii," he said, "and then go home carrying bags of macadamia nuts and pineapples and kona coffee. We could produce some sort of chocolate product. But we don't have any idea right now what it would be."

Possibly, he said, it could have a distinctive flavor. In certain countries — Trinidad, Grenada and Ecuador were three he mentioned — the cocoa products have unique flavors.

Matlick was in Hawaii in June when the participants in the joint venture had a "ground blessing." This, he said, "dates to the old [Hawaiian] tribal ways of doing things. There's a lot of tradition, a lot of mystique to be found in Hawaii."

Of the venture, he said, "Agronomically we feel we can do this. Economically it will take a couple of years to determine if it's viable."