

Kava Stakeholders Plan Regulatory Review and Market Return

by Joerg Gruenwald, PhD

The roads of the Fiji islands of Taveuni are empty these days. A thriving economy based on the export of the traditional Pacific crop kava (*Piper methysticum* G. Forst., Piperaceae) collapsed in 2001 due to allegations in Europe that the plant extract caused liver toxicity.¹ This shocked native island people as their ancestors had been drinking kava extracts for thousands of years for ceremonial and social purposes without such apparent effect. An explanation of this surprising turn of events was suggested at the recent meeting in Brussels, Belgium, of Pacific and European kava stakeholders.

The first-ever European-Pacific Kava Stakeholders meeting was held in Brussels on August 25 and 26, 2003, organized by the European Centre for the Development of Enterprise (CDE) and PROINVEST, both based in Brussels. The main objective of the

on the pharmacological and clinical documentation of kava (Phytopharm Report part IIA and B) and a detailed case analysis of all reported cases of hepatotoxic events (Phytopharm Report part IIA Annex 1). The findings presented in the Phytopharm Report clearly speak for the safety and efficacy of kava in the symptomatic treatment of anxiety and stress and, in most aspects, strongly supported the scientists' charges that the kava ban was not justified based on the available scientific and medical evidence. Furthermore, the report criticized the German health authority (*Bundesinstitut für Arzneimittel und Medizinprodukte* or BfArM, the Federal Institute for Drugs and Medical Devices) for having ignored and misinterpreted important scientific data in its evaluation and for creating an obviously distorted image for kava.

The meeting brought together key participants from the Pacific Region and Europe, representing a cross section of stakeholders, namely European manufacturers, regulatory agencies, kava exporters, scientists and experts, and organizations such as the CDE, PROINVEST, PIFS, Commonwealth Secretariat (COMSEC), European Commission (EC), the World Health Organization (WHO), and the Technical Centre for Agricultural and Rural Cooperation ACP-EU (CTA). The meeting also reviewed alternative strategies that might be used to reintroduce kava into European markets, established a detailed action plan, and identified the possible roles and contribution of the different organizations and representatives in achieving these goals.

Kava Strategy: The Way Forward

The stakeholders acknowledged the significant economic, social and cultural damage done by the market recalls, restrictions, and bans. They noted that the negative publicity from the numerous kava bans, alerts, and market recalls had led to an adverse economic impact for the South Pacific kava industry predominantly located in Fiji, Samoa, Tonga, and Vanuatu. Since 2001 loss of local export earnings in the South Pacific was more than US\$200 million, and many thousands of jobs in both the South

Pacific and Europe. The ban especially affected the incomes of rural farmers and processors as well as foreign exchange, as exports are seriously adversely affected. The meeting further noted the loss of business for the European importers.

The participants also endorsed the findings of the Phytopharm Report, and agreed to use its scientific evidence, which clearly indicate that the bans, sales restrictions, and market recalls by the regulators in respective EU countries were unjustified (see Table 1). Such bans and restrictions also ignored the huge body of positive evidence on efficacy and safety of kava.

The stakeholders agreed to establish an International Kava Executive Committee (IKEC) comprising representatives of the stakeholders and organizations to address immediate and future issues

meeting was to explore ways to re-establish the kava trade between the European Union (EU) member states and South Pacific countries. A major focus of discussion was the main findings of the study entitled "In-Depth Investigation of EU Member States Market Restrictions on Kava Products" (Phytopharm Report) presented by Phytopharm Consulting at the end of March 2003. The entire report can be downloaded from <www.analyze-realize.com/Publications/Kava.en.html>.²

The report was commissioned by the EU CDE, on behalf of some kava-producing countries in the South Pacific and the Pacific Island Forum Secretariat (PIFS), to critically evaluate whether or not the restrictions placed on kava by some European health authorities are justified. It included an independent expert report



