

Balsa – a potential tree crop for plantation development in Papua New Guinea

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Abstract:

Balsa (*Ochroma pyramidale* Sw.) of Bombacaceae family is cultivated as a commercial tree crop in many tropical countries including Papua New Guinea (PNG). Balsa, a native hardwood species of South America (Ecuador, Peru), was introduced in PNG by early European settlers in the 1960s. The species acclimatizes well in humid tropical conditions where soil type, temperature, humidity, and rainfall favours its prolific growth performances. Where conditions are conducive, balsa can grow very fast reaching 20 m in height and 50-70 cm dbh within 6-8 years as harvestable age. In PNG, smallholder farmers grow the balsa as a tree crop in the New Guinea Island region (East & West New Britain Provinces) for processing and marketing. Annually, PNG contributes 8% of its share of balsa product to international timber market as a 2nd largest producer after Ecuador which dominates the market with 90% supply. Balsa has an extremely low density (soft and light) wood and finds its end use in engineering constructions where high density woods are not necessarily required. For instance, balsa wood is used in light constructions like wind turbine blades, sporting equipment, boats, aircraft, insulation board, etc. This paper discusses balsa as a potential tree crop for plantation establishments in PNG given the favourable environmental conditions and market demand. It also highlights present balsa growing provinces and other potential provinces, current log buying prices, balsa supply chain, and export markets.