

AfricaRice to launch Sawah system in Benin, Togo

COTONOU, BENIN: The Benin-based Africa Rice Centre (AfricaRice), with technical and financial support from Japan has launched a project to help African rice farmers maximise the potential of inland valleys, through ecological management.

Inland valleys in sub-Saharan Africa constitute a largely unexploited land resource of about 190 million hectares that provide opportunities for irrigation and offer potential for sustainable rice expansion and intensification.

The new project will focus on the testing and adaptation of a proven rice production technology used in Asia - known as Sawah - which helps to boost rice production through improved water and soil management. The Sawah system includes the use of small machinery for land preparation and good crop management practices.

More food security

"With increased risk of droughts in large parts of Africa because of climate change, well-managed inland valleys can contribute to food security through enhanced productivity of rice-based systems," explained Dr Paul Kiepe, speaking on behalf of the AfricaRice director general at the project launching meeting. Dr Kiepe is heading the Centre's Sustainable Productivity Enhancement Program.

In Africa, rice is the fastest growing food staple. The gap between demand and supply in sub-Saharan Africa, where rice is grown and eaten in 38 countries, reached 10 million tons of milled rice in 2008, costing the region an estimated US\$3.6 billion for imports.

It is estimated that the annual potential production of 20 million hectares of Sawah systems in sub-Saharan Africa would be at least 30 to 40 million tons of milled rice. The increased production would thus help African countries to sharply curtail their risky over-dependence on rice imports and stave off future food crises.

Project partners

The new project will initially cover Benin and Togo and is expected to expand to other countries that are members of the Inland Valley Consortium (IVC). The Consortium is convened by AfricaRice.

The project partners include the International Water Management Institute (IWMI), the national programs of the IVC member countries, Hitotsubashi, Tsukuba and Kinki Universities in Japan and the Universities of Hohenheim and Munich in Germany.

In addition to the representatives of all project partners and other organisations with related expertise, the meeting brought

together high-level dignitaries of the Government of Japan, notably the ambassador of Japan in Benin and representatives of the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (MAFF).

Japan has prioritised agriculture in its support to African development at the Tokyo International Conference on African Development-IV in 2008. As Japan has a long tradition and expertise in rice production, it has forged strong collaboration with AfricaRice since more than three decades. Currently seven Japanese scientists are working in several joint projects at AfricaRice.

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