

Govt to teach farmers new methods to boost rice yield

Rice farmers are being urged to adopt a new internationally recognised farming technique that could boost local rice yields by one million tonnes

BY CHUN SOPHAL

CAMBODIAN farmers stand to increase rice production by one million tonnes with the adoption of System of Rice Intensification (SRI), Agriculture Minister Chan Sarun said.

The Kingdom has some 2.3 million hectares of rice fields – two million for rainy season cultivation and 300,000 for the dry season – from which it produced 6.7 million tonnes of rice last year.

The new technique involves planting single rice plant seedlings as opposed to the traditional technique of planting multiple seedlings to grow in one location, the minister said. SRI was developed in Madagascar in the 1980s.

SRI is a method of rice cultivation first developed in Madagascar in the 1980s, and introduced to Cambodia in 2000 by the Cambodian Centre for the Study of Agriculture (CEDAC), a local agricultural NGO.

"We will gain over one million tonnes of rice each year from the use of the new system because it will use less seeds and increase rice yields," Chan Sarun told the *Post* Monday.

He said information about the rice intensification system is being disseminated among the nation's rice farmers.

"I think there will be no difficulty in applying this new technology because it does not require a lot of labour or expensive chemical fertilisers," Chan Sarun said.

Yang Saing Koma, president of CEDAC – which is spearheading the drive for SRI – said about 100,000 families, or six per cent of

the country's rice farmers, have begun applying the new techniques to some 50,000 hectares of rice crops.

"It is not easy to spread this new system into farms across Cambodia unless the [agriculture] ministry and the government continue to support these activities," he said.

He said the group needs five more years before they can achieve the expected gain of one million tonnes in rice production.

Ith Sarun, director of the Takeo Agriculture Office, said most farmers still use the traditional methods of rice growing, which require more seeds but produce fewer yields, because they do not yet understand the basics of the new system.

"We have noticed that very few people here have adopted the new intensification farming system at present," he said.

A recent CEDAC report found that rice intensification farming uses only 10 kilograms of seed per hectare for both rainy and dry season rice – significantly less than the 70 kilograms of seed required under traditional methods for the rainy season, and 150 kilograms for dry season rice.

The report also found that yields for both seasons were twice what they were using traditional production methods.

In March 2008, the price of rice shot up to US\$700 per tonne, leaving government officials and farmers alike fearful of a crisis if production levels could not be increased.

Rice currently sells for \$530 per tonne.



A farmer works a rice paddy in Bati district, Takeo province. The government hopes to increase rice yields by encouraging farmers to adopt new techniques. HENG CHIVAN