

Experts prepare rice farms ahead of dam

They have been deployed to lay the ground work for increased rice production.

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Kenya and Japan are working to double rice production at the Mwea Irrigation Scheme once the Sh19 billion Thiba dam is complete.

The dam, whose construction was launched by President Uhuru Kenyatta in November last year, is expected boost rice production to 160,000 metric tonnes. Its construction is expected to be complete in three years.

Currently, the scheme established by the British in 1956 produces an average of 80,000 metric tonnes of rice annually.

This is expected to rise sharply once the dam, which will feed the rice farms with uninterrupted water supply, is up and running.

To handle the anticipated huge rice harvest, teams of researchers and irrigation experts have pitched camp in the expansive irrigation scheme to work on new rice varieties, water-saving rice culture, proper crop husbandry, harvesting and storage mechanism as well as processing and marketing.

Already, Japan, through the Japanese International Cooperation Agency (Jica) has set up a Sh90 million molecular laboratory at the Kenya Agricultural and Livestock Research Organisation (Karlo) centre in the region.

Resistant varieties

The laboratory, located at Kimbimbi on the outskirts of the rice fields, is charged with developing weather and disease resistant rice varieties that are compatible with low soil fertility.

According to the center manager, John Kimani, researchers have already developed eight new rice varieties which, after going through the required field

160,000
tonnes

Expected annual production of rice after the completion of the dam

tests and adaptability processes, will be released to farmers.

"Some people are only looking at the mega dam and not realising that behind the scenes there other key partners working hard to be ready to improve the rice sector for the good of the farmers once the dam is completed in the next three years," said Dr Kimani.

Experts say that the current varieties of rice, which were introduced decades ago, have reached a point of stagnation in terms of production.

Through JICA, farmers have also been introduced to Rice-based and Marketing Agriculture Promotion Project (RiceMAP), which

involves the dissemination of rice production knowledge and technologies to boost farmer's incomes.

"This project not only aims at training the farmers on various irrigation methods and crop husbandry but also on modern ways of growing rice," said the project manager, Engineer David Njogu.

New technologies

New technologies that use less water and more mechanisation of weeding, harvesting and threshing processes have also been introduced.

The Japanese have developed a Push-Weeder technology through which two farmers can weed an acre of rice farm in a day as opposed to the manual weeding that requires up to eight farmers.

According to, Yuji Yunoki, a JICA engineer attached to the project, new technologies have seen rice production rise from 23 bags per acre in 2013 to 30 bags today. This means farmers' income has risen from Sh80,000 per acre per season to Sh225,000.

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