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Luang Prabang farmers lead way in rice intensification

Luang Prabang province is leading the way in using the innovative System of Rice Intensification cultivation technique, which increases yields and boosts farmers' incomes.

Some farmers who have used this system have produced 6-7 tonnes of rice per hectare, while the traditional method only produces 3-4 tonnes.

Some families who plant in fertile soil with good irrigation had produced about 9 tonnes per hectare, provincial agriculture section officer Ms Soudalath Keoboulapha told *Vientiane Times* yesterday.

The method has benefited many farming families in Laos' northern provinces and is to be expanded to farmers around the country.

However, Luang Prabang's rice production still fails to meet local consumption needs due to a shortage of land and the fact that some rice is supplied to tourists visiting the province, she said.

Last year, the province produced more than 100,000 tonnes of rice, sufficient for only 6-7 months, so additional rice had to be bought from neighbouring provinces, Ms Soudalath said.

It is anticipated that the rice intensification method will help provincial farmers produce enough rice for consumption and sale at markets.

Provincial authorities are encouraging farmers to plant a further 1,000 hectares of rice using the single rice seedling method with output expected to increase this year in irrigated areas, she said.

The technique requires an irrigation system to flood the rice fields and drain them. Once drained the fields can be easily weeded and the soil drilled.

The Northern Communities and Irrigation Management Sector Project will try to introduce the new method to more farmers every year.

In 2008, the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry instructed its offices in each province to promote the rice intensification system.

Land farmed this way has increased from 1,437 hectares in the 2008-2009 dry season and 2,550 hectares in the wet season to 3,625 hectares in the 2009-2010 dry season and 5,000 hectares in the wet season.

The system involves planting 7-10-day-old rice seedlings at least 30cm apart, using good water management, rigorous weeding and improvement of soil quality using tools and, later in the cycle, organic fertilisers, according to the Irrigation Department.

Farmers who use the system can reduce the amount of seeds required from 60kg to 6kg per hectare compared to traditional methods, increase their yields by 50-100 percent, reduce water usage by 30-50 percent, lower capital expenses by 10-30 percent, and increase income levels by 100-300 percent.

The project officially started in December 2007 when a memorandum of understanding was signed between the Department of Irrigation and Pro-net 21.

Only 13 farming families were involved in the project when it first began according to the Northern Communities and Irrigation Management Sector Project.

By Khamphone Syvongxay
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