

Zambia embraces irrigation to mitigate effects of global warming on farming

600,000

The size of land in acres that Zambia plans to put under irrigation in the next two years.

\$200m

The amount of money the Zambian government has allocated to promote irrigation. The funds will be used in offering subsidies to farmers enable them to get access to irrigation kits at an affordable price, according to Agriculture minister.

70%

The percentage of the Zambian land suitable for irrigation because of availability of underground water.



Zambian Agriculture minister Given Lubinda.

BY RATIN NEWS WRITER

Africa relies on rain-fed agriculture for food production, which is detrimental in the wake of climate change that has affected the normal weather patterns. Growers in Kenya, for instance, can no longer foretell if the long rains will be coming in April, which normally signifies the beginning of the planting season. Irrigation farming is now becoming

a reality in eastern and southern Africa with the countries in this region spearheading this agricultural system.

In Zambia, the state is promoting irrigation by offering subsidies on the equipment as well as creating awareness.

EAGC RATIN writer spoke to the Zambian minister for Agriculture Given Lubinda in the country's capital Lusaka over the state of grain in the country as well as the measures that the government has put in place to promote irrigation farming.

How would you describe the uptake of irrigation by farmers in Zambia?

The uptake is still low and currently it's only the commercial farmers who have embraced irrigation farming due to their financial ability, while the small

scale holders still rely on rains to plant their season's crop.

What steps is the government putting in place to promote irrigation farming?

We have been carrying out sensitisation programmes to educate farmers on the benefits that come with irrigation farming. It is a known fact that we can no longer be relying on the rain fed agriculture in the wake of climate change that has resulted to erratic rain patterns.

From our assessment, farmers will produce more when they adopt irrigation as they will have two seasons of crop as opposed to the current one season.

What interventions has the Zambian government put in place to promote irrigation?

We have set aside \$200 million to promote irrigation; these funds will be used in offering subsidies to farmers enable them to get access to irrigation kits at an affordable price.

The government will also build dams that will benefit the growers.

More than 70 per cent of the Zambian land is suitable for irrigation because of availability of underground water, but only a fraction of it is currently under irrigation cover.

How many acres is the government targeting to open up for irrigation?

We are projecting to open up 600,000 acres of land under irrigation in the next two years. We have already finalized the plans that include setting aside funds for this project as well as identified areas for expansion.

How would you compare irrigated agriculture to the rain fed in terms of earnings?

Obviously a farmer will earn more revenue when he/she embraces irrigation because they can grow crops two times in a year.

With irrigation, a farmer doesn't have to wait for the rains to grow crops, and this will enable them to plant during dry season and harvest when there is a scarcity in the market, hence increasing demand for his produce, resulting to better prices.

Zambia is one of the African nations that produce enough grain to feed its people and export the surplus to other countries, what has been the secret behind the good yields?

Apart from good climatic conditions that prevail in our country, as a government, we have invested heavily in training farmers on good agricultural practices that have seen their yields increase tremendously.

We have also offered farmers subsidies in terms of fertilizer and

seeds to ensure that they plant certified seeds that have potential to yield more.

Given that farmers have been using organic fertilizer, which is 'poisonous' to the soil, we have educated them on the use of lime after every planting season in order to reduce the acidity in their lands caused by the continuous use of these fertilizer.

How much maize have you been exporting to other countries in the last five years?

Zambia is a net exporter of grain and we have been exporting over a million tonnes every year, except this year where we will only manage to sell out 860,000 tonnes due to heavy rains that affected our maize crop in the farms.

Your government has been advocating conservation farming, how has this move been received by farmers?

We have reached more than 400,000 on conservation farming and most of them have embraced this method due to increased yields that they have witnessed.

With conservation farming, a farmer does not require to break the soil in form of ploughing as it has been a tradition over the years, but rather clear the weeds and plant directly, the significance of this is that there is little disturbance on the soil.