

AGRICULTURE

Joint effort with food firms to boost rice



Officials sit beside a farmer in Roi Et who joined the climate-smart rice cultivation system.

Food companies have launched a joint project with the government to improve the economic viability of 1,200 rice farmers in Roi Et province and develop high-quality and sustainable *hom mali* fragrant rice with a climate-smart system to lessen climate change.

The Sustainable Hom Mali Rice project will be implemented for two-and-a-half years (2018-20). The main partners in the effort are Mars Food, Herba Bangkok SL (Ebro Foods SA), German development agency GIZ and Thailand's Rice Department.

The project aims to support 1,200 growers from each of the 12 community rice centres in Roi Et province in the production of 3,500 metric tonnes of hom mali rice.

"This initiative is part of Mars Food's journey to source rice from farmers working towards the Sustainable Rice Platform (SRP) standard," said Sineenart Chui-chulcherm, global commercial director of Mars Food. "In 2016, Mars Food reached an important milestone, and now all basmati rice is sourced from farmers working towards the SRP standard — representing 10% of our overall rice volume."

The project will implement numerous interventions such as educating farmers on SRP standards and agronomic technologies, giving access to high-quality seeds, enhancing the skills of farmer groups, improving gender equity and adopting

ICT-enabled traceability for food safety and quality considerations.

The partnership also aims to provide access to finance mechanisms and improve the financial literacy of agriculture cooperatives, with a focus on gender inclusion to unlock opportunities for women, said Matthias Bickel, GIZ Thailand's director for the agriculture and food cluster.

A great deal of discussion is going on about the sustainability of the rice sector, with focus on the livelihood of farmers, chemical usage, inclusiveness, food security and the overall condition and well-being of farmers, said Ignacio Yuste Sanchez, Herba Bangkok's regional managing director.

Anan Suwannarat, general director of the Rice Department, said hom mali rice has been declared "the world's best rice, and Thailand is one of the world's leading rice exporters, yet rice farmers are among the lowest earners in the country's agriculture sector. Many Thai rice farmers face rising production costs and fluctuating prices."

Through this programme the department will help farmers produce good-quality rice and reduce the cost of production while increasing rice yields.

"It is expected that the project will help the farmers earn additional income in each community," Mr Anan said.