

Falling growth rate of rice yield worrying: IRRI chief

SOHEL PARVEZ

RICE yield is increasing but the rate of increase has slowed down in recent years in a worrying development for Bangladesh, said Matthew Morell, director general of the International Rice Research Institute (IRRI).

The growth rate of rice yield slowed to 1 percent in 2011-2017 from 2.8 percent in 2001-10.

"This needs to increase to ensure the staple for the growing population," he told The Daily Star in an interview last week in Dhaka. Continuous population growth is a major challenge for Bangladesh as it enforces tough choices in the form of making more land available for agriculture or urbanisation.

"Bangladesh is a country that does not have new frontiers to find new land, and you also have pressures on water availability and water quality."

Over the last five and a half decades, the international agency helped Bangladesh develop more than 100 high-yielding varieties (HYVs) of rice by working with Bangladesh Rice Research Institute (BRRI) and other state research agencies.

And cultivation of HYVs has resulted in increasing yield and enabled the nation to triple its annual production to about 3.50 crore tonnes from about 1 crore of the cereal just after independence, according to official data.

In fiscal 2016-17, the annual average yield of the staple food stood at 3.07 tonnes per hectare in contrast to 1.09 tonnes in 1970-

71, according to the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS).

In recent years, the yield of rice from each hectare hovered around the 3 tonne-mark.

The yield increase is linked to a number of factors, including the introduction of new varieties and improvement in farm management practices at farmer's level, Morell said.

Mechanisation of rice production and operating larger farm sizes are necessary to increase productivity.

Bangladesh has released several climate-smart rice varieties, three of which are drought-tolerant, six submergence-tolerant and 10 salinity-tolerant.

Cultivation of the varieties has reduced production loss from climatic stresses, significantly increased rice production in stress-prone areas and income of farmers, and improved food security, he said.

Asked about food safety concerns, Morell said: "We agree with the concern and we agree with the general desire to reduce unnecessary use of chemicals."

IRRI promotes practices such as integrated pest management that minimise the use of synthetic pesticides.

"This has beneficial effect on rice agro ecosystem and human health and it also addresses food safety concerns."

Rice, in general, is safe, but there are few things that need to be checked from time to time such as heavy metal and arsenic contamination and pesticide use.

"These are really very significant problems. We should be monitoring the rice crop to



Matthew Morell

make sure there are not any issues that we need to be concerned about."

For Bangladesh, it is cadmium and arsenic contamination that need to be checked from time to time. Arsenic is present in soil and water and cadmium in soil, so regular screening is needed.

IRRI is developing methods to detect to heavy metal presence in rice, Morell said.

It has established an IRRI South Asia Regional Centre in Varanasi, India. The cen-

tre's lab facilities can analyse rice grain quality and identify metal contamination in rice.

"Bangladesh can take advantage of this facility," the IRRI chief said.

On the genetically-engineered Golden Rice, he said the variety has got approval from regulatory agencies from the US, Australia, New Zealand and Canada. It is currently going through the regulatory process in Bangladesh and in the Philippines.

In Bangladesh, the application was lodged

to the National Committee of Biosafety in November, 2017.

"It's about 15 months. They are examining the dossier. So, we would hope that they will make their decision in the coming months."

On concerns related to Golden Rice, he said the IRRI has very rigorous criteria for releasing the variety.

"This is why we went to go through the regulation process in the US, Australia, Canada and New Zealand. These are some of the toughest regulatory agencies in the world and Golden Rice met the criteria set by them."

The variety can be made available to farmers the way other HYVs were.

IRRI said BRRI scientists are introducing the beta-carotene producing Golden Rice trait into the popular, high-yielding local inbred rice varieties (BRRI Dhan 29).

This means that farmers will be able to save their seeds for replanting in succeeding planting seasons, it added.

On the risks of cultivation of the crop here, Morell said: "It's a very well understood product and there is beta-carotene in many plants. This is something that occurs naturally in other plants. So, I do not see any particular risks here in Bangladesh."

For policymakers, Morell said the science and technology are needed in many areas to help improve productivity.

"But it is no good if that knowledge stays in the laboratory. It needs to come out to the farmers. That's an important area for policymakers to think about."

Catering on board, with care

KOWSHER JAHAN KHALED

LUXURY airline Emirates has emerged as an icon in flight catering business with the same diligence for the first, business and economy class passengers, offering food of every region it flies to.

Based at Dubai International Airport, Emirates Flight Catering provides airline, events and VIP catering, as well as ancillary services including laundry and airport lounge food and beverages.

To keep up with regional and seasonal food trends, Emirates changes its onboard menus monthly and continually reviews its recipes.

With employees drawn from 55 nations, Emirates Flight Catering is the largest of its kind producing on average 225,000 meals per day for Emirates itself, 105 other carriers and airport lounges.

"We passionately promote excellence and efficiency and that's why we're industry leader," said Saeed Mohammed, chief executive officer of Emirates Flight Catering.

Since Bangladesh is an important market for Emirates, a team of Bangladeshi journalists was flown to the airline's Dubai base to let them see how its flight catering units operate.

The catering units span 88,000 square metres and incorporate the highest level of automation available



A staff member checks quality of food at a flight catering unit of Emirates at Dubai International Airport.

to airline catering facilities, including a 2.55km-long electric monorail which transports meal carts.

A conveyor system transfers clean items from the equipment cleaning area to the production kitchen for food plating and then on to the operational areas for flight packing. The facilities also feature a vacuum waste system. Both facilities boast the latest systems in hygiene, energy saving and automated food production equipment.

"As one of the world's largest air-

line catering operations, Emirates Flight Catering constantly looks at innovation, and ways to improve productivity, product and service quality," said Mohammed.

"Introducing the latest technology to our operations, we secure our own supply chain with high quality and locally-sourced fresh vegetables, while significantly reducing our environmental footprint."

The airline recycles on average three tonnes of plastic per month, while 21 tonnes of aluminum are

sorted and recycled every year. Every month, the airline recovers over 65 tonnes of cardboard packaging which is recycled into new paper products. Emirates Flight Catering also collects recyclable materials from the hospitality lounges in the Dubai airport concourses and from other food and beverage outlets in and around Dubai.

The procurement team plays a vital role within the catering units, but it can only be as good as its network of suppliers, said officials.

"Whether we are buying food or non-food products and services, we are passionate about working with great suppliers and building strong working relationships," said Adil Akbar, food stores manager at Emirates Flight Catering.

The procurement process is based on competitive tendering and on the principles of transparency, he said. "We will not compromise on quality and will only source from suppliers that meet or who have given a commitment to achieve our standards

within an agreed timescale."

The airline puts a lot of emphasis on hygiene as catering on board is different and requires to follow a stringent set of rules, said Rowelle Uty, duty officer warehouse.

Hygiene issues stretch from the collection of raw materials to the production and presentation processes.

"Emirates abides by strict rules of consumer rights and maintains global standards," Rowelle added.

To improve and sustain quality and standards, Emirates Flight Catering has a learning and development department to provide a comprehensive set of learning and development programmes aligned with the company goals and values, according to its website. It nurtures careers through advanced certification and managerial competence for those who lead teams.

It has developed a number of courses that are conducted internally by qualified trainers. The aim is to provide employees with the tools to evaluate and improve their own performance, as well as to optimise team performance. The range of courses is designed to align the employees with job requirements, and full understanding of workplace performance and safety practices.

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Yunus, BNP Paribas launch ClimateSeed

STAR BUSINESS DESK

Nobel Peace Laureate Professor Muhammad Yunus signed an agreement with BNP Paribas in Paris on March 28 to create a social business company called ClimateSeed.

This is the first independent social business company created by the French international banking group, Yunus Centre in Bangladesh said in a statement yesterday.

"It will combat the adverse effects of climate changes in a social business way," according to the statement.

The agreement was signed between Grameen Creative Lab of Germany—of which Professor Yunus is a co-founder and chairman—and BNP Paribas.

The agreement marks the launch of a five-year global partnership that will see the Grameen Creative Lab (GCL) and BNP Paribas working together to roll out social businesses within the BNP Paribas Group.

BNP Paribas Securities Services launched ClimateSeed, a marketplace that allows companies seeking to offset their carbon emissions and contribute to the UN sustainable development goals to

come into contact with projects offering voluntary carbon credits and seeking financing.

ClimateSeed will reinvest all profits in carbon footprint reduction initiatives and in maximising its positive impact on society and the environment, Yunus Centre said.

The partnership will also build awareness among BNP Paribas employees about social business and will support GCL with pro bono legal advice.

"We are very excited about this collaboration. It is a strong message: one of the world's largest banking groups creating their own social businesses and promoting the concept among its employees," Yunus said.

"We hope it will inspire many others to do the same."

"The challenges facing society today require BNP Paribas to strengthen its long-standing commitment to sustainable and equitable growth," said Antoine Sire, head of corporate engagement and member of the executive committee of BNP Paribas.

"Like Professor Muhammad Yunus, we are convinced that social business is a way to achieve this."

JOHNSON & JOHNSON'S

Baby shampoo samples fail Indian quality test

REUTERS, New Delhi

JOHNSON & Johnson's baby shampoo samples failed quality tests conducted by the northwestern Indian state of Rajasthan, according to a public notice from the state's drugs watchdog, findings that were rejected by the US drugmaker. This comes just a few months

after Indian authorities launched an investigation into J&J's Baby Powder to see if it contains cancer-causing asbestos. J&J said in late February it had resumed production of baby talc after government tests found no asbestos in the product.

The Rajasthan Drugs Control Organisation's notice dated March 5 bit.ly/2FNMagi said that the samples of J&J's baby shampoo taken

from two batches had failed the quality test as they contained "harmful ingredients". It did not elaborate.

A J&J spokeswoman said that the results it received from the watchdog indicated that formaldehyde had been discovered in the samples. Formaldehyde, used in making building materials, is a known carcinogen.

"We do not accept the interim results given to us, which mentioned samples to 'contain harmful ingredients- identification positive for formaldehyde,'" she told Reuters.

"We unequivocally maintain that our products are safe and our assurance process is amongst the most rigorous in the world," the J&J spokeswoman said, adding that the company has contested the interim test results of the government analysis that were based on "unknown and unspecified methods".

The two batches of the baby shampoo tested are due to expire in September 2021 and were manufactured at the company's plant in the northern state of Himachal

Pradesh, according to the watchdog's notice. "We have confirmed to the Indian authorities that we do not add formaldehyde as an ingredient in our shampoo nor does Johnson's baby shampoo contain any ingredient that can release formaldehyde over time," the company spokeswoman said.

The Rajasthan Drugs Control Organisation and India's Central Drugs Standard Control Organisation (CDSCO) were not immediately available to comment.

The federal regulator and its counterparts in Indian states launched an investigation into J&J's Baby Powder following a Reuters report in December that the firm knew for decades that cancer-causing asbestos could be found in the product.

J&J has described the Reuters article as "one-sided, false and inflammatory".

J&J's Baby Powder is one of the most recognised foreign brands in the country. The company leads sales in the Indian baby and child toiletries market, according to market research provider Euromonitor.



Bottles of Johnson's baby powder and Johnson's baby shampoo are displayed in a store in New York City.