

AGRICULTURE

German help for sustainable farming

PAWEE SIRIMAI

A German government agency has introduced a new international rice farming standard for Thai farmers aimed at helping them to lower cost and upgrade agricultural practices towards sustainability.

Matthias Bickel, project director of Asean Sustainable Agrifood Systems of the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ), the German government's sustainable development service provider, said it was helping Thailand to implement the agricultural practices, especially in the rice sector.

GIZ is financed by the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development to support Asean in implementing its food, agriculture and forestry plan (2016-25).

Mr Bickel said under this plan, GIZ

works with Thailand's Rice Department to set up a public-private partnership called the Better Rice Initiatives Asia (BRIA) to develop a sustainable rice standard to be adopted throughout the region.

The BRIA collaboration will include the United Nations Environment Programme, the International Rice Research Institute and Olam International, a global commodity trader.

He said this standard requires farmers to use an appropriate amount of fertiliser at the proper time and relies on less pesticide and more biological plant protection products.

"Thai farmers are overusing fertiliser on their crops, which substantially increases the cost of production," said Mr Bickel.

He said adopting the standard would help farmers reduce input costs through lower use of fertiliser and pesticides.

"It is a myth that producing rice in a sustainable way costs more than the traditional way," said Mr Bickel.

He said GIZ data showed farmers who follow the standard can save 20-40% on input costs, helping to increase their profit, which is a big incentive for farmers to follow the programme.

BRIA also partners with global food producers such as Mars and Kellogg's that promised to shift their entire rice sourcing to sustainable production by 2020.

Domestic demand for sustainably produced rice in Thailand is low, meaning its price is similar to that produced with overuse of fertiliser and pesticides, said Mr Bickel.

GIZ is working with farmers in Ubon Ratchathani initially to adopt the standard, with the first production harvested this year.