

Thailand's organic rice farmers enjoy health benefits

Thailand's rice farmers are happy this year. Rice prices have more than doubled on both the domestic and international markets, so paddy in the field means money in the bank, or at least fewer debts to pay off.

Organic rice farmers have even more to smile about.

Although organic rice farming is still miniscule in Thailand, where most farmers remain attached to their chemical fertilizers and industrial pesticides, those who have taken the green plunge are reaping double rewards this year.

'If you use chemical fertilizer you have to buy from the market and now the price of fertilizer is very high because it is linked to oil prices,' said Upin Khasana, an organic rice farmer in Sanam Chai Ket district of Chachoengsao province, 60 km east of Bangkok.

Upin belongs to a 15-family co-op of farmers who decided to switch to organic rice growing seven years ago, with technical input from Green Net, a non-governmental organization that promotes organic farming in Thailand and helps farmers sell their crops on the domestic market and abroad.

The Chachoengsao co-op uses only natural fertilizer-cow and goat droppings-and no chemical pesticides. In return, Green Net buys their rice at a premium price, usually a little above the market's, and handles the certification process under the International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements (IFOAM), selling under the Green Net brand name.

After 14 years in the business, Green Net is only producing about 2,000 tons a year of organic rice, supplied by cooperatives in Yasothon, Chiang Mai, Uttaradit, Loei, Khon Khen and Chachoengsao provinces.

'We started out just selling locally, but now we export about 85 percent,' said Vitoon Panyakul, director of the Green Net.

Green Net's only competitor in the organic rice trade is the Capital Rice Company, one of Thailand's leading rice exporters.

Capital Rice started an organic rice farm project in Chiang Rai province in 1991, at the request of Italy's Riseria Monferrato S.p.A., a major rice distributor in Europe.

Last year, Capital Rice exported about 1,000 tons of organic rice under its Great Harvest brand, mainly to Europe.

'If you compare that to Capital Rice's total exports, it is very small, less than one percent,' said Wanlop Pichpongsa, deputy managing director of the company.

Thailand's total rice exports last year amounted to 9.55 million tons, earning the country \$3.6 billion. This year's rice exports are estimated to reach 8.75 million tons, earning as much as \$4.7 billion, winning farmers and exporters a bonanza from higher commodity prices, ramped up by high oil prices and artificial shortages caused by export bans in India and Vietnam.

If anything, the doubling of rice prices this year is probably bad news for organic rice traders such as Green Net and Capital Rice, since higher prices will encourage farmers to try to produce more paddy by using more chemical fertilizers.

'In a way it is okay, because we will see that those who remain with us are really committed to the organic cause,' said Green Net's Vitoon. 'So it's a way to shake things up a bit and see who is in it just for the money and who is committed.'

Capital Rice has put its organic rice expansion plans on hold, also because of uncertainty about farmers' 'commitment.'

'The character of a community has to be suitable for organic farming,' noted Wanlop. 'Not every community is suitable. For instance, the rice growers in the central plains can grow rice two-three times a year by using chemicals and pesticides, so they are not interested.'

But for the organic rice growers of Sanam Chai Khet in Chachoengsao, staying committed to the organic cause is more about choosing a lifestyle.

'We do it for our lives more than for the money,' said Nutchainat Keowuwee, a member of the Chachoengsao Green Net co-op. 'My husband worked with chemical fertilizer for a long time and he became sick. His health was no good. That's one reason I switched to organic.'

In Sanam Chai Khet, as in most rice growing villages in Thailand, the farmers keep most of their rice harvest for their own consumption through the year, selling only a portion of it to Green Net for sale on the domestic or export markets.

'The price we get for our rice is about the same as the market price, but what we get is better health,' said Uenfah Chamkhet, another co-op member. 'We are saving money on medical bills.'

Peter Janssen (© IANS / India eNews)