



# Weekly news

## April 22-25, 2024

Highlight on farmers, agribusiness and rural development in Laos



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### Young farmers get lessons on yield-boosting crop growing methods

**VT Times, April 22, 2024**

A group of 79 young people from crop growing areas in Vientiane recently learnt about the essential techniques needed to boost yields, ensure better crop quality, and maintain soil health. The group took part in a workshop that was attended by the General Director of the Youth Vocational Development Department, Mr Beeya Yathotou, together with senior ministry officials and invited guests.

The training session was held at the Lao-Korea Rural Development Training Centre and organised by the Youth Vocational Development Department of the Lao Youth Union.

The Director of the Centre, Dr Vongsavanh Nongkaisone, said it was important for young people to broaden their knowledge of crop cultivation methods and play a more productive role in agriculture as part of capacity building in agricultural production.

He expressed the hope that workshop participants would use the lessons learnt from the workshop to solve the problems that are often encountered during crop cultivation and harvesting.

“We hope this workshop will improve the skills of young people living in Xaythany and Hadxaifong districts, who are the main target group,” he said.

Participants learnt about the basics of vegetable cultivation such as land preparation, seed selection and planting methods, as well as greenhouse installation, nursery and water system management, disease and pesticide control, and harvesting and post-harvesting technologies.

Land preparation lessons covered land clearing and weed removal, tests to determine the pH level and nutrient content of soil, tilling and digging, levelling and grading, and how to make raised vegetable beds.

The group learnt about the proper selection of greenhouses taking type and size into consideration, followed by instruction on how to install the base and assemble the frame.

Information was also provided about how to add the covering material such as glass panels, polycarbonate sheets, or plastic film; and how to install doors, vents, and irrigation and heating systems.

Lessons on disease and pesticide control explained the importance of crop rotation, how to select disease-resistant seed varieties, and the need to inspect plants regularly for signs of disease, including unusual discolouration, spots, wilting, or stunted growth.

Instructors also gave advice about good gardening hygiene, proper plant spacing, and the use of organic pest control methods.

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## **Labour ministry introduces new system to regulate foreign workers**

**VT Times, April 24, 2024**

The Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare plans to issue visas for illegal foreign workers and renew the work permits of legal foreign workers so they can continue to work in Laos.

Deputy Minister of Labour and Social Welfare Mr Phongsaisack Intharath said on Monday a system was introduced to accelerate the issuing of registration cards and the renewal of work permits for foreign workers in Laos on April 22-23.

The system is designed to ensure uniformity and streamline the issuing of worker entry permits, registration cards, and renewed work permits for foreign workers.

Although worker migration is unavoidable in today's modern world, every country tries to control immigration in line with their respective laws and regulations, an official said.

Last year, the government opened centres at provincial Labour and Social Welfare offices across the country to register foreigners and issue them with temporary work permits in a bid to regulate the number of undocumented migrant workers.

There were an estimated 24,000 illegal workers out of 54,000 foreign workers in Laos in the past year, mainly from Vietnam, China and Thailand.

The new system will make government services in this area of work more efficient and accurate. Various aspects of worker regulation will be improved as needed, such as the centralisation of the issuing of permits for foreign workers.

Provincial Departments of Labour and Social Welfare and the Department in Vientiane grant permission for the hiring of foreign workers and collect the associated fees. They also submit reports about the number of foreign workers returning to Laos, impose measures against rule-breakers, and perform other duties.

The relevant sectors and the public have been urged to share in resolving the problem of undocumented workers and ensure that all foreign workers are registered.

The new system will also be used to help solve the labour shortage in Laos.

The new measures will involve collecting information and identifying the number of foreigners working illegally so that authorities can then assign resources to regulate the situation and avoid past problems.

The Ministry and Departments of Labour and Social Welfare are urgently seeking to resolve labour-related issues by coordinating with relevant sectors at both the central and local levels to ensure they carry out their roles and responsibilities effectively.

According to the Labour Management Department of the Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare, the government began registering migrant workers in 2012, to ensure social order and protect workers' rights, coinciding with the inauguration of the Asean Economic Community.

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## **Hot weather killing off fish as farmers see fall in profits**

**VT Times, April 25, 2024.**

Commercial fish farmers are seeing a sharp decline in their profits as hot weather is killing the fish they keep in cages in rivers.

Each day hundreds of fish die and large numbers of fish don't want to eat the feed we give them, Ms Ajarng, a commercial fish farmer on the Nam Ngum river in Xaythany district, Vientiane, told the *Vientiane Times* on Wednesday.

She feels she has been unlucky this year in terms of her business and has called on the authorities to find a way to resolve the problem as the unrelenting heat continues to kill her fish.

Fisheries officials have advised farmers to move the cages into deeper water and pump oxygen into their enclosures, as a lack of oxygen is the main reason for the fish deaths.

During periods of hot weather, dissolved levels of oxygen in rivers often decline, while the metabolic rate in most fish increases. That means that fish are often affected by both temperature and a drop in the water's natural oxygen levels.

After a few days of continuous rain, air temperatures will fall, water levels will rise, and the oxygen levels in rivers will return to normal.

However, temperatures in Vientiane are forecast to remain very high in the coming days.

Ms Ajarng is currently selling tilapia for 40,000 kip per kilogram but can sell dead fish for only 5,000 kip per kilogram.

People buy dead fish to make fermented fish sauce for supply to local markets, she said.

The sale price of farmed tilapia at markets is currently 50,000 kip per kilogram, which is higher than in previous years.

Fisheries play an important role in rural livelihoods in all regions of Laos.

Fishing activities are carried out as part of a diverse rural livelihood and are ranked as the second or third most important activity after rice farming and animal husbandry.

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## **In Vietnam, Farmers Reduce Methane Emissions by Changing How They Grow Rice**

**abcnews, April 23, 2024**

LONG AN, Vietnam (AP) — There is one thing that distinguishes 60-year-old Vo Van Van's rice fields from a mosaic of thousands of other emerald fields across Long An province in southern Vietnam's Mekong Delta: It isn't entirely flooded.

That and the giant drone, its wingspan similar to that of an eagle, chuffing high above as it rains organic fertilizer onto the knee-high rice seedlings billowing below.

Using less water and using a drone to fertilize are new techniques that Van is trying and Vietnam hopes will help solve a paradox at the heart of growing rice: The finicky crop isn't just vulnerable to climate change but also contributes uniquely to it.

Rice must be grown separately from other crops and seedlings have to be individually planted in flooded fields; backbreaking, dirty work requiring a lot of labor and water that generates a lot of methane, a potent planet-warming gas that can trap more than 80-times more heat in the atmosphere in the short term than carbon dioxide.

It's a problem unique to growing rice, as inundated fields stop oxygen from entering the soil, creating the conditions for methane-producing bacteria. Rice paddies contribute 8% of all human-made methane in the atmosphere, according to a 2023 Food and Agriculture Organization report.

Vietnam is the world's third-largest rice exporter, and the staple importance to Vietnamese culture is palpable in the Mekong Delta. The fertile patchwork of green fields crisscrossed by silvery waterways has helped stave off famine since the Vietnam War ended in 1975. Rice isn't just the mainstay of most meals, it is considered a gift from the gods and continues to be venerated.

It is molded into noodles and sheets and fermented into wine. In busy markets, motorcyclists lug 10-kilogram (22-pound) bags to their homes. Barges haul mountains of the grain up and down the Mekong River. Rice kernels are then dried and hulled by machines before they're packed for sale in factories, lined from floor to ceiling with sacks of rice.

Van has been working with one of Vietnam's largest rice exporters, the Loc Troi Group, for the past two years and is using a different method of irrigation known as alternate wetting and drying, or AWD. This requires less water than traditional farming since his paddy fields aren't continuously submerged. They also produce less methane.

Using the drone to fertilize the crops saves on labor costs. With climate shocks pushing a migration to cities, Van said that it's harder to find people to work the farms. It also ensures precise amounts of fertilizers are applied. Too much fertilizer causes the soil to release Earth-warming nitrogen gases.

Once crops are harvested, Van no longer burns the rice stubble — a major cause of air pollution in Vietnam and in its neighbors, as well as Thailand and India. Instead, it's collected by the Loc Troi Group for sale to other companies that use it as livestock feed and for growing straw mushrooms, a popular addition to stir-fries.

Van benefits in various ways. His costs are down while his farm yield is the same. Using organic fertilizer enables him to sell to European markets where customers are willing to pay a premium for organic rice. Best of all, he has time to tend to his own garden.

"I am growing jackfruit and coconut," he said.

Loc Troi Group CEO Nguyen Duy Thuan said that those methods enable farmers to use 40% less rice seed and 30% less water. Costs for pesticides, fertilizer and labor also are lower. Thuan said Loc Troi — which exports to more than 40 countries including in Europe, Africa, the United States and Japan — is working with farmers to expand acreage using its methods from the current 100 hectares to 300,000 hectares.

That's a long way from Vietnam's own target of growing "high quality, low emission rice" on 1 million hectares of farmland, an area more than six times the size of London, by 2030. Vietnamese officials estimate that would reduce production costs by a fifth and increase farmers' profits by more than \$600 million, according to the state media outlet Vietnam News.

Vietnam recognized early on that it had to reconfigure its rice sector. It was the largest rice exporter, ahead of both India and Thailand, to sign a 2021 pledge to reduce methane emissions at the annual United Nations climate summit in Glasgow, Scotland.

Each year, the industry suffers losses of over \$400 million, according to recent research by Vietnam's Water Resources Science Institute. This is worrying, not just for the country but for the world.

The Mekong Delta, where 90% of Vietnam's exported rice is farmed, is one of the world's regions most vulnerable to climate change. A U.N. climate change report in 2022 warned of heavier flooding in the wet season and droughts in the dry season. Scores of dams built upstream in China and Laos have reduced the river's flow and the amount of sediment that it carries downriver to the sea. The sea level is rising and turning the river's lower reaches salty. And unsustainable levels of groundwater pumping and sand mining for construction have added to the problems.

Changing centuries-old forms of rice farming is expensive, and even though methane is a more potent cause of global warming than carbon dioxide, it only receives 2% of climate financing, Ajay Banga, the World Bank's president, told the U.N. climate summit in Dubai last year.

Combating methane emissions is the "one rare, clear area" where low-cost, effective and replicable solutions exist, Banga said. The World Bank is supporting Vietnam's efforts and has begun helping the Indonesian government to expand climate resilient farming as a part of more than a dozen projects to reduce methane worldwide.

The hope is that more countries will follow, though there is no “one-size-fits-all,” said Lewis H. Ziska, a professor of environmental health sciences at Columbia University. “The one commonality is that water is needed,” he said, adding that different methods of planting and irrigation can help manage water better.

Growing more genetically diverse rice varieties would also help because some are more resilient to excess heat or require less water, while others might even emit less methane, he said.

Nguyen Van Nhut, director of the rice export company Hoang Minh Nhat, said its suppliers are using varieties of rice that can thrive even when the water is briny and the heat is extreme.

Now, the business is adapting to the unseasonal rains that make it harder to dry the rice, adding to risks from mold or insect damage. Typically, rice is dried in the sun immediately after harvest, but Nhut said his company has drying facilities in their packaging factory and also will install machinery to dry the grains closer to the fields. “We don’t know which month is the rainy season, like we did before,” he said.

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