

Tapping nation's irrigation potential

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Researchers indicate that Ethiopia has an over 70 million hectares of arable land - of which only 12 million hectares are being cultivated.



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With a view to harnessing the untapped potential and benefit farmers, pastoralists and semi-pastoralists, the government has introduced 'Water Master Plan' to be adopted and implemented for cultivating a bumper irrigation projects throughout the country.

Currently, the construction of mega irrigation projects is underway in most parts of the country with some nearing completion.

"With abundant water resource - dubbed as 'the water tower of Africa' - the country has been facing recurrent drought over the last decades. Even if the country is home to longest and huge yearlong flowing rivers, in every corner of the country, the nation has cultivated not more than 2.8 million hectares of land last Ethiopian fiscal year [July 8, 2016-July 7, 2017].



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By this Ethiopian fiscal year, the country aims at reaching the total irrigation potential to 3.3 million hectares [with a production volume of 469 million quintal] as revealed by Ministry of Agriculture and Natural Resources Smallholder Horticulture Development Director Dereje Yigezu.

Currently, farmers nationwide are aware of the benefits of producing market-oriented fruit and vegetables as well as export-oriented cash crops, he adds.

According to him, the development of horticulture crops through irrigation is better than that of seed crops. "Ethiopia has been facing adverse challenges of climate change which has been hampering its crop production and productivity."

Dereje further says that farmers across the country also witness the tangible role of irrigation in boosting production and productivity.

He also said that expanding sustainable irrigation mechanisms require determined moves of the sector's practitioners such as researchers and agricultural extension workers.



Farmers need to understand value of the agricultural chain

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The practitioners' efforts exerted so far triggered the use of modern technology in the farming sector - the use of drip irrigation and solar-powered water pumps are few of them in this regard.

Ministry Small-scale Irrigation Development Expansion Directorate Director Elias Awol indicates that the ministry is undertaking mechanized and small-scale irrigation development countrywide. The introduction of easily operational irrigation technologies is also showing a remarkable progress in the farmers' field, he adds.

"Solar-powered pumping technology is currently in pilot test in two states; Oromia and Southern Nation, Nationalities and Peoples state. Farmers at the pilot test areas have also shown great enthusiasm to adopt and implement the technology," he says.

Elias underscores that the solar-powered pumping technology showcases the country's deep commitment to building climate resilient green economy.

Regarding, furrow irrigation Elias says: "It is not practised properly in some parts of the country due to low awareness. Thus we are offering training to raise their awareness.

"The nation is transitioning from a rain-fed agricultural system to an irrigation reliable agricultural system as per the demand of farmers. The farmers have noticed a visible production and productivity increment while practising irrigation."

He emphasised the need for allocating more budgets to develop wide-scheme irrigation infrastructure networks.

Researchers in the area indicate that it is possible to irrigate over 10.1 million hectares of land in Ethiopia. This is not to mention the country's favourable climate and fertile land. Thus, the efforts in expanding irrigation infrastructure ought to continue. Besides, the private sector needs to be encouraged more to involve in this lucrative area.

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