

Galana-Kulalu game changer in Kenya's quest for self-reliance in maize production



An agricultural officer inspects maize crop in Galana-Kulalu.

Sh260bn

The cost of Galana-Kulalu irrigation project, a public private partnership between the Kenyan government and private investors.

Sh3.5bn

The allocation in Kenya shillings by the Treasury towards the Galana-Kulalu project.

41%

The percentage contribution of the irrigation project's expected maize output to Kenya's total annual consumption from the 200,000 acres set aside for cultivation in Galana-Kulalu.

BY RATIN NEWS WRITER

The Galana-Kulalu irrigation scheme promises to be a game-changer in Kenya's pursuit to bridge an annual production deficit of its main maize staple food and cut reliance on imports from markets in the region.

On completion the one million acre scheme will be the biggest in east and southern Africa — signifying Kenya's big dreams of attaining food sufficiency.

Reliance on unreliable rain-fed agriculture has over the years left Kenya with an annual deficit of 10 million bags of maize — a situation that stands to be reversed once the Galana-Kulalu irrigation project goes full throttle.

The viability of the irrigation project has already been proven following the maiden harvest of crop planted on the first 10,000 acre tract of the model farm.

The National Irrigation Board (NIB) expects to realise 20,000 bags of maize from the first batch of 500 acres that was planted in May this year.

This implies that on every acre of land under irrigation, some 40 bags of maize will be harvested — a performance that is much higher than the national average of 17 bags per acre for growers in the country's maize grain basket in the Rift Valley who have to deal with the frustrations of unreliable rain-fed agriculture.

According to NIB general manager Daniel Barasa, the number of bags per acre is expected to go up in the subsequent harvests after the trials on more

than 10 seed varieties that were planted identified the breed that would yield the most.

Green Arava, an Israeli firm which has been contracted to develop the 10,000-acre model farm, targets an harvest of up to 80 bags of maize an acre based on the advanced agronomical technologies employed in the project.

But even with its promising future, the Galana-Kulalu project faces the challenges of underfunding by the government.

In the last three years, the Treasury has allocated about Sh3.5 billion towards the project. This is insufficient given the capital intensive nature of the venture that targets to address the high cost of maize, mainly imported from other countries.

Mr Barasa believes that the 200,000 acres of land at Galana-Kulalu that is marked for maize production is sufficient to yield enough maize that would cancel out imports from Tanzania

and Uganda.

Maize deficit

“By cultivating 200,000 acres of Galana-Kulalu complex, we would have met 41 per cent of the country's annual maize consumption of 48 million bags, hence providing enough maize to bridge the deficit,” said he said.

Maize at Galana will be grown for one season annually to lower the risk of oversupply in the market which could hurt farmers' earnings. Maize farmers in the country's breadbasket of the North Rift had raised concerns over the Galana project,

expressing fears that it will affect the price of their produce once production on large scale commences.

Agriculture Principal Secretary Sicily Kariuki says small-scale farmers will be offered subsidized soy beans and simsim seeds in an in a drive that is informed by the need to diversify Kenya's food crops and encourage large-scale maize farming.

Maize is a major source of income for the majority of small-scale farmers, but its prices plummet by more than half after every harvest season that starts in October, leaving growers with losses.

“We will not use pressure to make them diversify to other crops, but the government will put in place measures to encourage them to venture into other alternatives,” said Ms Kariuki.

She said the government had set aside Sh200 million to distribute an assortment of high value seeds, which will not include maize, in the current budget.

Land sub-division has cut production of major crops and the country is trying to address this by introducing irrigated large-scale farming such as the Galana-Kulalu irrigation project.

Cutting costs

The Galana farm will use minimal human labour by employing mechanised farming, irrigation and milling, thus cutting costs significantly.

Eng Barasa said food from Galana will be cheaper because the farm will employ the latest technology in growing the crops as well as processing, hence reducing the cost of production.

“This is a mechanized project from planting to processing and the use of machines will play a significant role in cutting down the cost of production,” he said.

The model farm has revealed that the cost of production under irrigation is cheaper by 40 per cent than the conventional way of planting maize, a good indicator that the cost of food is going to be affordable once large production begins.

The model farm is being used as a demonstration block for developing the entire one million acres set aside for irrigation.

Large-scale production at the Galana Kulalu irrigation scheme will start in the next three years after the completion of a dam to support the 500,000 acres of land to be put under crop cover.

The NIB site engineer Hen-

ry Ocheire says they are seeking Sh250 billion to construct the dam as well as other infrastructure as the current flow of River Galana can only irrigate 20,000 acres.

The project was supposed to cover one million acres but feasibility studies have indicated that the available water from the river has a capacity to irrigate 500,000 acres when it is dammed.

Mr Ocheire noted that to irrigate the entire one million acres, they would need to tap water from the High Grand Falls in River Tana, which is 200 kilometres away.

The two billion cubic meters dam will be set up on the Galana River in the next financial year after the completion of the current model farm that covers 10,000 acres.

“Eventually, we shall put the entire one million acres under crop cover once we tap the water from High Grand Falls dam,” Mr Ocheire said.

Foreign investors

Galana, a Sh260 billion project, is a public private partnership and the government is expected to provide infrastructure services while the investors plant crops and set up manufacturing factories for processing their produce. Foreign investors have topped the list of firms lined up for the project.

Eng Barasa says the government is evaluating a list of 80 local and international investors who had sent applications to lease land at the Sh260 billion scheme.

The applicants include firms from Brazil, Australia and China which have expressed interest in deploying technology to boost food production.

The GM pointed out that all crop coming out of Galana will have to be processed on the farm and ferried to the supermarket shelves for selling as finished products.

“None of the produce from the scheme will get to the market without adding value. We are doing this so that we can lower the high cost of food in the country,” he pointed out.

A multi-million maize milling has been procured and will be installed on the farm starting next month to enable processing of flour that is expected from Galana.

The state-of-the-art facility will have the ability to process and package the flour for sale immediately after leaving the farm.