

Zimbabwe: Country Turns to Drought-Resistant Crops

BY BULAWAYO, 29 OCTOBER 2012

As planting season approaches amid concerns about successive poor harvests, research into drought-resistant seeds is gaining momentum in an indication that the Zimbabwean government is waking up to the reality of climate change.

Earlier this month, the country's Meteorological Services Department announced that another drought is likely during what should be the rainy season.

Zimbabwean farmers have suffered a succession of poor harvests with yields far below what the country needs, forcing the agriculture ministry repeatedly to revise its projections for harvests.

Farmers and their unions blame the cyclical uncertainties of their sector not only on a lack of up-to-date farming technology, but also on their inability to obtain seed varieties that can survive the low rainfall caused by climatic shifts.

Despite erratic rainfall, farmers have continued to follow traditional planting seasons. This has increased their frustration as crops wilt from lack of rain.

But this could soon change, thanks to progress by government scientists researching faster-maturing and drought-tolerant seed varieties, holding out the hope of much-needed relief for thousands of farmers across the country.

The Scientific and Industrial Research and Development Centre (SIRDC), in partnership with the University of Zimbabwe and Biotechnology Research Institute (BRI) has developed a drought-resistant variety of maize seed called Sirdamaize 113.

Farmers have had to wait between 150 and 180 days before harvesting their traditional maize crop, but the centre says the new seed takes only 136 days to mature.

Thomas Ndlovu, a smallholder farmer in Nyamandlovu, some 60 km (38 miles) from Bulawayo, said the new seed was welcome news, as he has lost his crop because of successive poor rains.

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"This is what we have always asked for," Ndlovu said. "My only hope is that this seed variety is affordable to us. We have for some time now been buying seed maize outside the country because the locally produced type is expensive."