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## Wanted ! water to grow sugar cane

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*For years, farmers in the North have been finding it difficult getting water for agricultural production. Succour may be on the way as technological strides in irrigation development are opening up new opportunities. Daniel Essiet reports on how irrigation is helping farmers in Niger State to grow sugar cane.*

FARMERS are finding ways to increase the production of sugar cane in the north.

One such method they have adopted is centre -pivot irrigation. It is a new technology which delivers water to the roots of plants. It can double or triple water productivity.

For big agro businesses,centre-pivot irrigation has become the wave of the future. Using sprinklers, the system apply irrigation water similar to rainfall. Water is pumped through pipes. It is then sprayed into the air and irrigated on the soil surface through spray heads so that it breaks up into small water drops which fall to the ground.

Sprinkler heads are modified to adjust the water volume applied per pass and the force with which the water droplets hit the soil surface. Because of this, big agricultural companies, often foreign-owned, are investing in centre-pivots.

Flour Mills of Nigeria has acquired a 15,000-hectare sugar farm to make Niger State one of the biggest producers of sugar cane in the country. Sunti Farm is located 30km west of Mokwa. The farm is the pride of the village. It is more than two hours drive from Minna.The farm cuts through the fringes of a desert-like area. The farm sits on hectares of sandy loam and clay soils. Over the last 20 years, the area has been under micro irrigation methods. Most farmers irrigated the way their predecessors did thousands of years ago. The other issue is that the area is suffering from extreme water shortage. There are major concerns the shortage will stand in the way of expansionary agriculture projects, threatening the notion of food self-sufficiency and contributing to the increase in food prices. The failure of irrigation water to reach the farm is among the foremost problems behind the water shortage crisis. It is cited by farmers as a major impediment to irrigating their crops.The water run dry, water tables drop, but the rationale for getting more crop per drop is mounting with more crop varieties. Because of this, the management of Sunti Farms cultivates sugar cane using centre pivot irrigation systems.The company owns a large centre pivot system capable of irrigating large hectares of sugar cane. It offers accurate water distribution at low pressure. It is also the most cost-effective way of irrigating on a large scale.

The Estate Manager,Mr John Beverley said for a big sugar farm, irrigation is crucial to its success. At the farm, the company has reportedly got some promising early results: irrigated fields yielded more sugar per hectare. But it has cost the company about N2billion to install the system. Generally, centre-pivot irrigation systems roll smoothly around, spraying out water and fertiliser in electronically-controlled circles.

Beverley explained that, depending on the specific catchment, sugar cane is generally the largest water user.

According to him, irrigation technology has made huge advances, adding water management is essential in sugar farming. He said

the irrigation scheme would allow for farming on 4500 hectares of dry land in the areas. The new irrigation scheme utilise water from River Niger and existing water sources and ensure that the communal farmers who have for long not been utilising their quota do so under the new irrigation scheme.

He said there were many benefits in irrigation agriculture. "You get increased yields and afford employment opportunities to the rural people," he said.

Beverley said the company irrigate the sugar beet plots using lateral-move sprinkler equipped with sprinkler heads that were positioned 10 feet above the soil. The sprinkler heads are modified so that irrigations had either low or high droplet energies.

The explosion of a sugar farm is in stark contrast to its desolate surroundings. There are dwindling water supplies and a large labour pool. The big advantage of pivot is that it requires much less labour. The company has to deploy the sprinkler irrigation system to obtain better returns.

Many farmers still practise unplanned irrigation. Its efficiency is low. Around the farms, the water crisis is so acute that the sustainability of agriculture is being threatened. The demand for water is also growing at a very rapid pace, influencing the amount of water that can be supplied for agriculture. As a result, the estate manager said amending irrigation is the only way out if agriculture is to be sustained profitably. Beverley had a lot of success with centre-pivot irrigation. With irrigation, the company can practise agriculture 12 months. He had every reason to be excited about this.

To little farmers, investment in an irrigation scheme might look big at the beginning, but commercial farming business. Beverley said it is necessary in a place such as Mokwa because it will help them produce crops throughout the year, and the money is quickly recovered.

Over the last decade, the large centre pivot systems have not been tailored to the needs of poor farmers. At least, 10,000 hectares of sugarcane will be grown by the year 2015 as the company avail more virgin land for the growing of the crop to boost the country's sugar production. The company has crafted a "sugar industry expansion programme meant to increase production of the crop by indigenous farmers".

Group Managing Director, Flour Mills, Paul Gbededo, said the firm is growing its food business, expanding into the agro-allied realm.

He said: "We are growing our food business. We are also expanding into the agro-allied space and we think we will be able to add more value to the country. We are still restructuring. We are consolidating. We are looking for areas to create and add value, not only to our stakeholders, but also the Nigerian populace."

According to him, the firm is making substantial effort in the direction of food security in the country. "We have acquired over 15,000 hectares of land, growing basically sugarcane. And this is part of our backward integration programme in support of the Federal Government's agricultural and industrial transformation agenda," he said.

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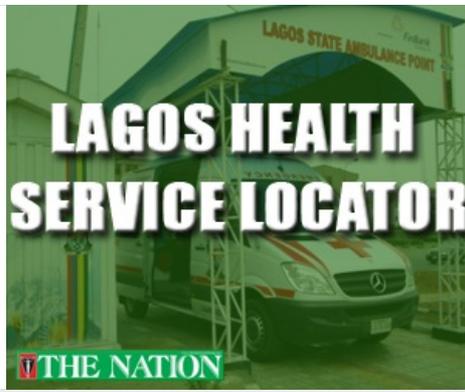
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