



Harnessing Kenya's great potato Production potential

Potato is the second most important crop after maize in Kenya, contributing Ksh 50 Billion annually despite great focus on maize which yields Ksh 120 Billion per year.

According to the National Potato Council of Kenya (NPCK) chief executive officer Mr. Wachira Kaguongo, this figure can be increased if value addition and

agribusinesses are optimized along the value chains.

The rapid growth of the fast food industry has led to the increase in potato consumption in the urban areas.

It is rare to have any Kenyan meal without potato as one of its ingredients. Ranging from Irio, Githeri, Matoke, Kienyeji, Chips, Bhajia and Crisps to mention but a few; all these are local dishes that are prepared with potatoes.

This crop which is largely grown by small-scale farmers, is mainly produced in

13 counties in Kenya; Nyandarua, Meru, Bomet, Nakuru, Elgeyo, Marakwet, Nyeri, Kiambu, Taita Taveta, Narok, Uasin Gishu, Trans Nzoia, West Pokot and Bungoma.

There is a predominant variety preferred in each county. For example, in Bomet the red-skinned Dutch Robyn is widely grown. For Molo, it is the white-skinned Shangi which is prominent and in Meru Central, the red-skinned Asante is predominantly grown.

Variety preferences are mostly dictated by availability of markets, yield potential and consumer taste. However like

everything else in the planet earth, the Kenyan potato industry has numerous challenges that are hindering best production levels of the crop.

NPCK chief executive officer Mr. Wachira, in an interview with Hortfresh Journal crew highlighted a number of stumbling blocks facing potato production in the country. These issues if dealt with, the production of potatoes will be better.

"There is a common trend by the farmers to grow own-saved tubers instead of certified & disease-free seed tubers. The

own saved tubers are highly infected by pests and diseases which are transferred from one generation to the other thus contributing to decreasing yields,” Wachira said. He indicated that only less than 2% of the planted area in Kenya is on certified seeds while about 3% is under clean and positively selected seed potato; over 95% is planted with seeds raised locally through retention from previous harvest, which farmers obtain from their stores or buy from local markets, friends and relatives. This leads to yield reducing with each successive generation.

There is also the general issue of poor harvesting techniques, poor marketing structure, unhygienic marketing facilities, lack of collective action in marketing & input sourcing, poor access roads that lead to low farm gate prices and

wastes among others. “Most farmers use tools like folk jembes to harvest potatoes and in most instances end up injuring a number of tubers during the process. Use of extended bags that weigh close to 200kgs lead to handling challenges hence ends up bruising the tubers due to dragging and dropping and also poses high health risk to the men who carry them using their backs.” He highlights.

Lack of information and awareness among potato growers also lead to some middlemen duping farmers. “Traders have been buying large quantities of potatoes that are packed in various sizes of extended bags with no standard unit of measure and they fix prices arbitrary leading to exploitation of farmers.” Mr. Wachira noted.

Production of potatoes in Kenya is bi-modal, that is, it is produced twice a year following the rainfall pattern. Around July to August period, potatoes are usually in glut and fetch low prices while in December, April, and May they are in shortage thus fetching high prices.

Due to continuous production of potatoes in the same pieces of land season after season, soil degradation has been inevitable. Fertilizer application has been done below the recommended rates and not necessarily guided by nutrients need based on soil testing with the most common type used being Di-Ammonium Phosphate.

There are constraints of diseases like Bacterial wilt, Brown rot and Late blight. Poor storage facilities and lack of enough capital for intensive production that can see their overall production increase as result of employing motorized machinery.

Other hindrances shared by Mr. Kaguongo includes; absence of Potato farmer co-operative unions to advocate for farmers grievances, inadequate funds, inadequate support from both the public and private sector, few seed multipliers, inadequate policy and lack of skilled expertise in the industry. However, as the coordinator and organizer of the potato industry, the council has undertaken measures to ensure that a number of the



obstacles engulfing the potato industry are addressed.

The National Potato Council of Kenya (NPCK) is encouraging farmers to try out new potato varieties that have recently been introduced by the Kenya Agricultural and Livestock Research Organisation (KALRO). They are: Sherekea, Purple Gold and Mayan Gold which are high yielding and tolerant to diseases like Late Blight. The council is also encouraging farmers to try the newly released processing varieties in order to tap the niche markets.

The council also intends to have liaison officers in every County to work closely with County governments in educating farmers on good agricultural practices and importance of using high quality and certified seeds. There are also plans to establish an SMS based information platform to enable farmers get response in regards to seed queries and market information. It is also working closely with AFFA in developing regulations and also encouraging participation of stakeholders in the processes of formulating and implementing policy, regulations and standards in the industry.

In addition, Mr. Wachira noted that if the structure of the extension services



were improved then the industry would perform better. "Inadequate linkages between extension, research, market and farmers under the new dispensation is posing a big challenge and NPCK is trying to work with all stakeholders to fill this gap." He says. The Council is working closely with other key organizations, such as KEPHIS and AFFA, to ensure seeds introduced into the country through importation are safe and pose no risk to the industry and relevant regulations in production and marketing are adhered to.

Other measures being undertaken by the council to improve potato production includes enhancing adoption of low cost potato seed technologies. This is being implemented in partnership with International Potato Center, Mount Kenya University, KALRO, National Youth Service, University

of Nairobi and County governments among others. The technologies include rapid seed multiplication; seed plot, aeroponics and hydroponics. There are also on-going trials for new heat tolerating potato varieties and implementation of regulation on the 50-kg packaging bag that was recently launched.

In Summary, NPCK Chief Executive Officer is very optimistic that if the potato subsector gets adequate budgetary, institutional and policy support to address the existing challenges it will contribute much more than the commonly policy-favoured crops in achieving vision 2030.

