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Food

USAID greenhouse project delivers the goods

Observer Reporter
Thursday, November 10, 2005



Farmers tending to tomatoes growing in a USAID greenhouse.

Manchester farmer Jervis Rowe is smiling all the way to the market. Rowe, one of 11 agriculturists benefiting from greenhouse technology under the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) Hurricane Ivan Recovery Programme, is harvesting an increased crop of tomatoes that is healthier than ever before.

"Growing in the greenhouse produces healthier products, and the use of chemicals is almost negligible," Rowe said. "I can now provide vine-ripe tomatoes to the consumer, which have a better flavour and appearance. The fruit is reaped fully mature, so it goes from the farm directly to the consumer. This fresher product, with a more uniform appearance, appeals to the high-end market."

editorial cartoon



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The use of greenhouses to produce better quality crops is part of the Jamaica Business Recovery Programme (JBRP), which helps restore small and medium enterprises hardest hit by Hurricane Ivan which lashed Jamaica's south coast with 145 mph winds last year September. Many farmers, especially those in the southern parishes, lost all of their crops under cultivation during the storm. They also lost farm equipment, buildings and potential sales. Losses in domestic production of fruits and vegetables were estimated at over J\$2.3 million.

The JBRP is part of a comprehensive J\$1.6-billion USAID Hurricane Ivan Recovery Programme. Beyond technical advice, the programme also helps identify markets and buyers and links them with JBRP producers, particularly exporters and those who target Jamaica's tourist markets.

Farmers like Rowe are not only producing crops of superior size, colour and shape, but are also taking advantage of high-end marketing opportunities in special markets, such as supermarkets, hotels and catering companies.

Rowe and other JBRP farmers are also helping to reduce Jamaica's reliance on imported horticultural produce.

This will be Rowe's first crop of tomatoes from the new greenhouse, and his yield is expected to be 15,000 lbs from the small 1/7 of an acre of ground space that his greenhouse occupies. He anticipates getting about 10 lbs of fruit from each plant - a yield significantly higher than tomatoes grown in the open field where the maximum yield is five or six lbs per plant.

According to JBRP director Joy Hall, "The greenhouses are giving some growers production yields nearly four times greater than open-field production, with marketable yields as high as 90 per cent as opposed to 75-80 per cent. That is a good harvest."

At an average cost of US\$7,500, greenhouses are also an excellent investment. Hall said that up to 1,500 plants can be grown in a greenhouse of 600 square metres. Although greenhouses cost more to build in the beginning, the eventual costs of controlling weeds and pests are minimal.

The low-cost greenhouses being used by the programme are made of lumber with plastic roof and antiviral netting on the sides. The plastic roof reflects ultraviolet rays, increasing the metabolic efficiency of the plants, and channels infrared rays out of the greenhouse. The antiviral netting reduces problems with pests, viruses and diseases. The greenhouses also use drip-irrigation systems to provide water and nutrients to crops.

Ten greenhouses have already been erected in the parishes of Manchester, Clarendon, St Ann and St Elizabeth. The JBRP is also assisting in rehabilitating a greenhouse in St Andrew and another is slated for erection in St Catherine.

Greenhouse specialist Melvin Medina has been overseeing construction of the greenhouses and providing technical



assistance to improve production and post-harvest techniques, integrated pest and crop management, contour farming, drip irrigation systems and other production and processing technologies.

Field demonstration farms are also being used as training sites to illustrate to other nearby farmers the advantages of greenhouse technology in producing high-value vegetable crops. The growers are required to contribute to the cost of land preparation and labour for building the greenhouses, as well as plant support systems.

The JBRP has a special emphasis on agribusiness - horticulture, poultry and livestock - as well as fisheries and craft. The programme is being implemented by the US agribusiness firm, Fintrac Incorporated, and the Jamaica Exporters' Association, under sub-agreements with Development Alternatives Inc.

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