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## **Fresh attempt to prop cashewnut production**

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By Benson Kathuri

A USAid funded International NGO in conjunction with the Ministry of Agriculture and KARI has embarked on a campaign to increase cashewnut production by 5,000 tonnes.

Industry sources say the new initiative by the Horticultural Development Centre (HDC), the ministry and Kari have attracted thousands of farmers who are eager to resume the crop farming.

Ninety frontline extension workers have already been trained to work with the coastal region farmers who abandoned the crop due to mismanagement and poor pay.

The cashewnut industry has previously been dogged by problems relating to poor crop husbandry, old trees, mismanagement, inadequate infrastructure and high costs of inputs.

Under the new initiative, each of the 90 officers will work with 200 farmers who will be required to plant at least 50 trees each.

The intervention is seen as a bold step aimed at lifting thousands of people in the coastal region that slipped into abject poverty after abandoning the crop.

"The focus of proposed interventions has been on processing, crop husbandry, post harvest handling, marketing, group mobilisation, regional competitiveness and credit availability," says HDC director, Dr Stephen New.

New further said ActionAid, another international NGO, had previously trained another 30 extension workers for the same purpose.

"Together, the 90 extension officers will be provided with a cashewnut technical kit and training materials during a launch of a cashew extension programme on Thursday next week," said New.

Cashewnut farming was the backbone of the coastal region in the early 80s but the activity collapsed under mismanagement and corruption.

The industry is at its lowest ebb after production dropped from 24,000 tonnes in the early 70s to a mere 10,000 tonnes.

By 1982, cashewnut worth Sh26 million was processed at the Kilifi factory, up from Sh3 million in 1975.

However, the plant collapsed in 1998 barely five years after it was privatised and bought by the then giant Kilifi Farmers Co-operative Society.

Since then, agents have frustrated farmers into abandoning the once vibrant economic activity by offering poor prices that could hardly meet the cost of production.

Though the factory was revived early last year, co-operative societies are still dormant and have been unable to provide sufficient supplies for processing.

Industry sources say the crop that has multiple uses, including being a crucial raw material to the confectionery industry, is fetching high prices in the international market.

Recent efforts by the various agencies hope to tap this potential and help farmers improve productivity of the trees by adopting high yielding varieties.

Kari has already introduced the A81 and A82 varieties, which are two high-yielding and fast growing cashewnut varieties.

HDC in conjunction with Real IPM, Bayer (EA) and the ministry had carried out spray efficacy trials on cashew trees as part of improving cashewnut productivity.

It is projected that with 3,000 well-trained and highly motivated farmers, production would rise and income triple to about Sh120 million annually.

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