

Urban Agriculture in Cuba to promote SRI

A nation-wide Urban Agriculture workshop was celebrated November, 21st 2007, in Havana, Cuba, with the aim to promote SRI within the agronomic guidelines for rice production of this institution. It was agreed that two municipalities in each of Cuba's 14 provinces will initiate trials beginning with the current rice planting season in December. In 2006, Cuban Urban Agriculture produced over four million tons of fresh vegetables and condiments for local consumption.

A total of 31 participants from the entire country included government functionaries and rice specialists and enthusiasts from seven of the 14 provinces. The event was chaired by Dr. Adolfo Rodriguez, Director, Cuban Urban Agriculture (INIFAT); Dr. Luis Alemán, Head of "Popular Rice", MINAG; and Dr. Jorge Hernandez, Director, Cuban Institute of Rice (IIA). During the workshop, the members welcomed visiting Dr. Bayardo J. Serrano Fernandez, President, National Institute of Agricultural Technologies, Nicaragua, who was given materials related to SRI in Spanish for his institute.

The workshop began with a Power Point presentation on SRI by Dr. Rena Perez. This was followed by the observations of four rice farmers and their experiences with SRI since its introduction in Cuba in 2001: 1) Mr. Juan F. Riambao, CPA "Camilo Cienfuegos", emphasized the advantage of younger seedlings and faster "pull & plant", the obtention of a better rice quality with SRI, as well as an increase in yield from 6 to 9.5 t/ha paddy; 2) Mr. Rodolfo Diaz, CPA "Jorge Dimitrov", who needs to produce sufficient rice to feed his 72 coop members and their families, recognized in SRI an important saving in petroleum due to lower water requirements and reminded the group of the need to study a ratoon, or second, crop with SRI; 3) Ing. Luis Romero, a mechanical engineer-turned farmer, and a member of the CCS "Jesus Menendez", provided data to suggest that with SRI there were fewer infertile tillers, that fertilizer timing and water management should be synchronized, that oxen could be used to cultivate SRI in the dry season and finally, that Urban Agriculture would surely learn a great deal from SRI and lastly, 4) Mr. Francisco Viera, in charge of Popular Rice production in the municipality of Quivican, Havana province, reported that formerly they used 50-60 day old seedlings but that now, due to SRI and certain other aspects, such as the use of manure and faster movement of seedlings, since 2004, his overall paddy results have improved from 3.0 to 5.1 t/ha. A fifth SRI farmer/promoter, Mr. Jose Garcia Borrego, responsible for the production of 40 ha of rice in CPA "Gilberto Leon" but unable to attend for reasons of work, would have contributed the following: the need for only 30% of transplanters compared to the former planting system, a savings of 50% of the water, fewer broken grain particles and less disease.

Following the interventions of the four SRI farmer/promoters, it was time for the remaining participants to say something and a sort of SRI-inspired verbal bedlam broke loose. The representative from hot and dry Guantanamo said that he had SRI in two municipalities; someone from Cienfuegos added that he would start a SRI campaign in that province; another agreed to assign SRI 14 small irrigation systems for their use in intensively-managed gardens; an unidentifiable voice mentioned that SRI has permeated the island like a new philosophy, while someone else added that "we shouldn't forget to use green manure."

A SRI participative group was created; three members were immediately selected-one from each of the three major rice producing institutions present-and warned that the rice season was just around the corner, in December, and not to lose any time. The head of Urban Agriculture expressed that from now on he would use a system to grade and monitor SRI throughout the

island, assigning each province half a point for obtaining their objective. The head of the Rice Institute commented that someone should prepare a document for the government, but the best was when this reporter heard Luis Aleman, the head of Popular Rice, say, that "from now on SRI has to be managed like baseball, to win!"

INIFAT (Instituto de Investigaciones Fundamentales en Agricultura Tropical) The director of INIFAT is also head of Cuban Urban Agriculture

CPA (Cooperativa de Produccion Agropecuaria) = Agricultural Production Cooperative

CCS (Cooperativa Credito y Servicios) = Credit and Service Cooperative

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