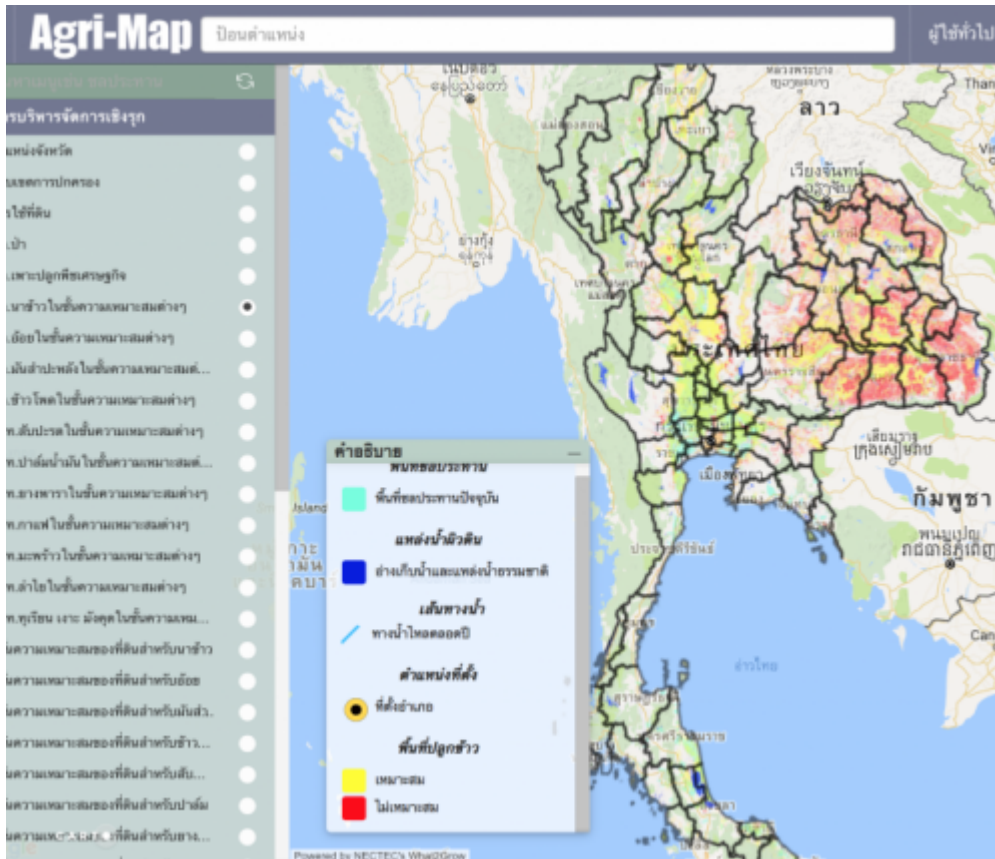


Isaan farmers and local officials slam failed rice policy

written by กองบรรณาธิการ | November 8, 2016



Rice farmers in the Northeast can currently choose one of two opposing agricultural policies, while one pays them to plant rice, a new scheme aims at diverting them from growing it.

By Donlawat Sunsuk



The Provincial Agriculture Office in Nong Bua Lamphu tried to register 2,600 households and 11,000 rai for the new policy, but only 300 households or 11.5% passed the government's criteria.

NONG BUA LAMPHU - For years rice policy in Thailand has been the Gordian knot for most governments, including that of Prime Minister General Prayuth Chan-ocha, who vowed to completely reform the country's rice sector after taking power in a coup in 2014. But a new policy that pays farmers to stop growing rice while seeking to reduce the crop's cultivation area seems to be ill conceived from the start.

The National Rice Policy and Management Committee (RPMC), a body established by the military government to oversee the rice industry's overhaul, introduced a new policy for the rice-growing season of 2016-17 to tackle Thailand's overproduction of rice.

Focusing on areas deemed unsuitable for rice cultivation, the policy targets all 20 provinces in the Northeast, seven Northern provinces, two Eastern provinces, and one Western province. Rice farming areas in the Central Region and the South are excluded from the policy.

The scheme was expected to attract 84,000 households and trim the country's total rice farming area by 570,000 rai (about 22,500 acres), anticipating a cut in the rice production rates by 9 million tons. It also aimed at encouraging rice farmers to transition to an integrated farming system and raising livestock.

Distributed through the local branches of the Bank for Agriculture and Agricultural Cooperatives, a budget of 2,61 billion baht (about USD 74.6 million) is paid out in direct subsidies. Each registered household receives 5,000 baht per rai for building irrigation systems and purchasing necessary inputs, 2,300 baht to raise fish in order to reduce families' daily spending on food, and about 2,800 baht to raise livestock.

Implemented in late August, 390,000 rai or 68 percent of the projected target group was

successfully registered through the policy. But based on this figure, the production rate of rice was unlikely to decrease from the year before, according to official estimates.

Local officials and rice farmers say that the policy's implementation start date was poorly chosen as farmers had already finished transplanting their rice seedlings.

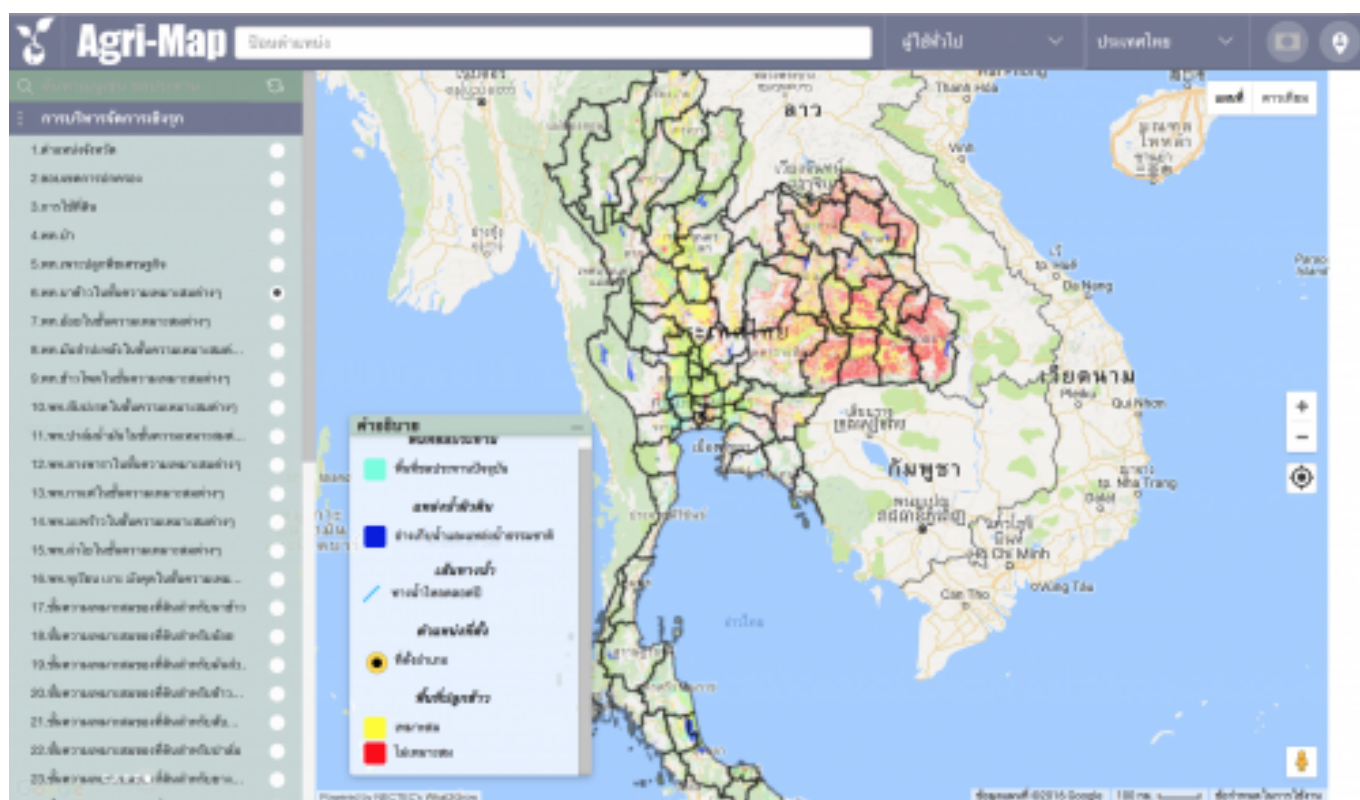
In addition, another rice scheme that subsidizes rice planters with 1000 baht per rai is still in place and seems to be working directly against the new policy.

Mr. Yo Phonkhang, a 73-year-old rice farmer from Hua Na village in Nong Bua Lamphu province's Muang district, decided against joining the new government program. When he heard of the policy in late August, he had already planted his rice and was registered under the rice subsidy scheme for the 1,000-baht-per-rai support, which pays rice farmers for up to ten rai per year.

"Suddenly, this policy is announced for us to sign up to stop growing rice," Mr. Yo said. "After reading the details, I thought that it was very complicated, asking us to do this and that, and to attend three workshops."

The policy specifies that eligible land must be deemed unsuitable for rice farming according to an official 'agri-map' (see graphic). Only landowners who farm their own land can register up to five rai per household, if they own less than 25 rai in total. Land size is determined through GPS technology by the Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperatives's Land Development Department.

These restrictions kept many farmers from joining the policy, according to Nong Bua Lamphu Provincial Agriculture Officer Phichian Ravira.



The 'agri-map' of the Ministry of Agriculture's Land Development Department specifies the country's agricultural areas based on suitability for rice farming. Most land deemed unsuitable for rice growing (marked red) is located in the Northeast. Source: <http://agri-map-online.moac.go.th/>

In Hua Na village, 22 households were enlisted, but none of them joined the policy in the end because the regulations were either unclear or unfeasible, said village headman Mr. Sakda Damrat

Mr. Sakda also noted that the agri-map specifying farming land in the village as unsuitable for rice production was confusing. The land of the 22 households wanting to join the policy was marked unsuitable for rice growing, even though it is located in a river basin.

“No matter how severe of a drought, this land will always have sufficient water for rice farming every year,” Mr. Sakda said.



“It’s a failed policy,” Nong Bua Lamphu Provincial Agriculture Officer Phichian Ravira said about the new government scheme designed to keep farmers from growing rice.

When Mr. Sakda inquired about the criteria to specify unsuitable land with local officials involved with the implementation of the policy, nobody was able to provide him an answer. Hua Na villagers said they were never asked to participate in the creation of the agri-map.

“Some villagers whose lands are located on high ground wanted to join the policy because the rice yield of their land isn’t good but they couldn’t because their names were not on the list,” Mr. Sakda said. “I went to ask the officials about this but they said it couldn’t be changed.”

Those in charge of the implementation say the policy is flawed because it includes too many requirements for farmers and involves a wide range of state agencies, which make the management of the policy a difficult and inefficient affair.

“There are only very few farmers here who passed all the criteria,” said Mr. Phichian from the Nong Bua Lamphu Provincial Agriculture Office. “It’s a failed policy.”

The Provincial Agriculture Office in Nong Bua Lamphu tried to register 2,600 households and 11,000 rai for the policy. But only 300 households or 11.5% and 1,500 rai passed the government’s criteria.

“I almost don’t dare to meet the farmers anymore [after this],” Mr. Phichian said, adding that for next year the government should announce the policy before the rice growing season begins and cut down on the number of requirements.

Director General of the Rice Department Anan Suwannarat acknowledged that this year the policy was unable to reach its projected goal of decreasing the rice growing area by 570,000 rai. But his department is preparing to submit a request to the Cabinet to renew the policy and to also ask for permission to extend the target area to land that is deemed unsuitable for rice cultivation in all regions.

Currently, the Rice Department's board is also discussing measures to address the low rice prices, which might include finding new export markets, Mr. Anan said.

Mr. Anan insisted that the government policy to encourage farmers to switch from growing rice to other crops would be of benefit to them.

"I acknowledge that it is very hard to change farmers' way of life, but we are trying to do our best according to the plan," Mr. Anan said. "This policy is not forcing anyone but is based on people's cooperation."

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