

50% saving on water, fertilizer, labour

Drip Irrigation can save Lanka's coconut industry

by Channa Kasturisinghe

Coconut which used to be Sri Lanka's second largest foreign exchange earner has been reduced to a subsistence crop over the years. Farmers and those in the coconut industry are turning to other crops and industries as their income levels are fast decreasing. The time has come for the industry's stakeholders along with the government to take drastic measures to revive this industry which provided a way of living for millions of people in this country.

One of the recent drawbacks faced by the industry was the prolonged drought in 2000/2001. As a result of it coconut production dropped by 14 percent in 2002. The output fell to 2,392 million nuts in 2002 recording the lowest production since 1993. This negative impact continued with the production further declining by 16 percent during the first quarter of 2003.

As a result of the depressed nut output, the production and export of the three major kernel products declined during the year 2002. The nut equivalent of desiccated coconut (DC) production, which declined by 43 percent in 2001, declined further by 40 percent and reached 246 million nuts, which is the lowest DC output since 1988.

Coconut oil production, which reported a significant improvement in 2001, also suffered a severe setback during the year due to the low crop. Coconut oil output declined by 53 percent to 265 million nut equivalents, the lowest level recorded since 1993. Copra exports and fresh nut exports also declined by 12 percent and 21 percent.

To make things worse for local consumers the average retail price of nuts increased by 36 percent prompting some Ministers to suggest the import of coconut to relieve the consumers from the burden. This pathetic situation of the once thriving

coconut industry in the country could be attributed to various factors. Although we have a proper institutional framework spearheaded by the Coconut Development Authority, Coconut Research Institute and Coconut Cultivation Board, the lack of a concerted effort towards improving the productivity of coconut lands has been a major constraint throughout.

Importing coconuts could be a solution in the short term. However, there should be strategies adopted to increase productivity of coconut plantations to ensure sustainable growth in the coconut industry.

Experts have suggested that the introduction of drip irrigation to coconut plantations would be the ideal solution to address this issue. However, due to the lack of awareness, specially among growers it has slowed the implementation of such strategies. There are only a few examples of using drip irrigation in coconut plantations in this country.

One such successful project is the 1,500 acre coconut plantation carried out by the Mahaweli Plantations Ltd. in Aralaganwila an area which was not considered conducive for coconut plantation at commercial level.

However, now the Government has provided an opportunity for coconut growers to adopt this method by extending a financial package of \$ 10 million to develop drip irrigation in coconut plantations.

The Chairman of the Coconut Cultivation Board Lincoln Fernando addressing growers at a recent meeting said that his institute has taken measures to provide Rs. 75,000 per 10 acres to growers to install drip irrigation systems in their plantations. He said the Board will assist growers to find highly qualified water management and irrigation engineers to install and

maintain the systems. He said that there are opportunities open with the existing Indian Line of Credit for growers to obtain financial assistance for drip irrigation projects.

A visiting expert on drip irrigation from the Department of Agriculture and Co-operation, Ministry Agriculture in India Dr. H.P Singh said that drip irrigation has proven to be successful in dry areas of India.

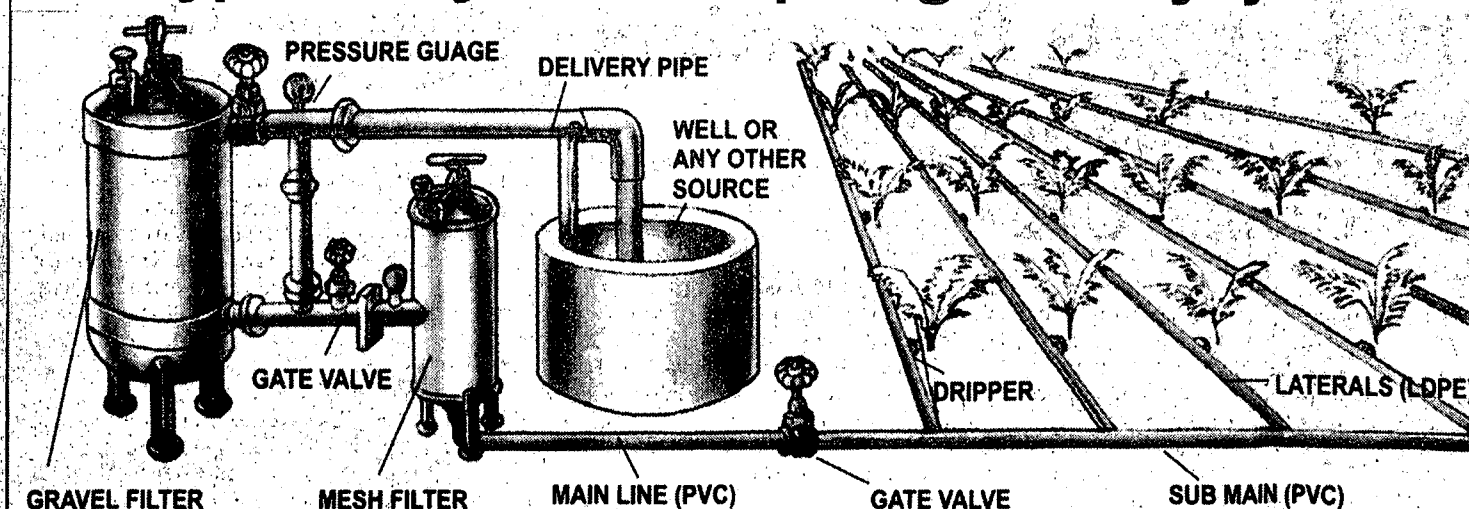
"It has increased productivity of coconut lands from 50 to 100 percent. The secret behind this technology is that it provides the right quantity of water to the plants with fertilizer.

"You can save 50 percent of cost on water, fertilizer and labour by using drip irrigation," Singh said.

He said however, there is much work to be done to popularise this modern technology in this country. "If the Government and the private sector gets together and make a true effort in promoting drip irrigation in Sri Lanka it will be able to face any drought condition without fear," Singh said.

Sri Lanka's climatic conditions are ideal for coconut cultivation. If the stakeholders of the industry make a concerted effort to make use of modern technology to promote this industry it can regain its lost place as a major foreign exchange earner. Otherwise the remaining coconut lands will be sold for housing purposes in the years to come leaving only a few coconut lands for the country's consumption.

A Typical Layout of Drip Irrigation System



Item	Unit	2000	2001(a)	2002(b)
1. Production (c)	Nuts.Mn	3,096	2,769	2,392
Desiccated coconut	Nuts Mn. (d)	712	408	246
Coconut oil	Nuts Mn. (d)	391	566	265
Copra (e)	Nuts Mn. (d)	84	81	71
Fresh nut exports	Nuts Mn.	29	28	22
Domestic nut consumption (f)	Nuts Mn.	1,849	1,786	1,810
Coconut cream and milk powder	Nuts Mn. (d)	31	30	33
2. Total extent	Hectares '000	439	439	439
3. Replanting/Underplanting (g)	Hectares	714	867	953
4. New planting (g) Hectares	834	993	904	
5. Fertilizer used	MT '000	34	30	37
6. Cost of Production	Rs./Nut	3.27	3.65	3.85
7. Retail price of a fresh nut	Rs./ Nut	9.04	10.50	14.29
8. Average export price f.o.b (h)	Rs./Nut	7.35	7.05	12.06
9. Export earnings	Rs./Mn	9,174	7,348	8,009
	US\$ Mn.	121	82	84
Kernel products (h)	Rs./Mn.	5,786	3,639	3,957
	US\$ Mn.	77	41	41
Other products	Rs.Mn.	3,388	3,709	4,052
	US\$ Mn.	45	42	42
10 Value added as% of GDP (i)		2.2	2.0	2.0