

Mitr Phol committed to embracing modern farming methods

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MITR PHOL GROUP, one of the Kingdom's leading sugar producers, began focusing on innovation several years ago in the belief that modern farming offers the best development path for the agricultural sector.

Buntoeng Vongkusolkit, chief operating officer of the sugarcane management business group at Mitr Phol, said the government was right to focus on modern farming because it would help solve labour shortages and environment problems in the sector, while creating a stable output and costs in farming.

"Thailand will move forward to precision farming methods in the next seven to 10 years. Mitr Phol changed to modern farming five years ago from traditional farming. Now it is time for Thai farmers to change and develop their enterprises to embrace modern farming," he said.

Mitr Phol was awarded the Bonsucro Sustainability Award in 2015 for helping sugarcane farmers shift their focus to "smart farming" and help reduce the cost of production while adopting new technology.

In 2016, the group became the first company in Thailand and the second firm in Asia to be certified by Bonsucro, an international not-for-profit, multi-stake-

holder organisation promoting sustainable sugarcane. Its stated aim is to reduce the environmental and social impacts of sugarcane production while recognising the need for economic sustainability.

Buntoeng said that more than four years ago Mitr Phol developed a smart farming project called Mitr Phol Modern Farm, which is in line with the government's current policy and the late King Bhumibol's philosophy on a sufficiency economy.

The group has transferred know-how and technology to small sugarcane farmers to help them become mid-sized farmers and, ultimately, large-scale farmers that have systems and sustainability management, he said.

Mitr Phol has studied research from many countries, including Brazil, the United States, and Australia, about growing quality sugarcane with efficient methods. This includes adjusting the distance between sugarcane plants during the growing period so as to reduce crop damage, a technique to loosen soil, and the adaptation of a GPS system for smart farming and control of large agricultural machines. The group has also encouraged farmers to use water with the most efficient outcomes and to increase sugarcane production with environmentally friendly methods.

Under Mitr Phol's sugarcane growing strategy, there are four key aspects such as farmers growing legumes when they are not growing sugarcane in order to reduce the use of pesticide and increase soil quality, as well as reduce cultivation by upgrading the sugarcane growing soil. The strategy also involves controlling truck traffic on sugarcane plantations to reduce losses from impacting on growing areas, and maintaining a trash blanket by allowing sugarcane-leave cover on the soil in order to keep it humid and do away with the need to burn sugarcane leaves. The latter practice helps to combat global warming.