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COA develops cheaper bean sorter

FOR SMALL FARMS: The machine built by the Hualien District Agricultural Research and Extension Station is cheaper than imported models, but handles smaller loads

By Chen Wei-han / Staff reporter

The Council of Agriculture has developed a low-cost soybean sorting machine to help Aboriginal farmers in Hualien County process quality, organic products that they have been processing manually.

The machine costs about one-10th of similar machines already on the market.

To help small farms that have been unable to afford machinery and had to pick the beans

manually, the Hualien District Agricultural Research and Extension Station developed a simple machine using a slanted conveyor belt to sift beans, researcher Chang Kuang-hua (張光華) said.

After rolling down the slanted belt, quality plump beans would bounce off the belt and land in either of two collection boxes — grade A and grade B — while substandard beans with flat shells would not bounce and end up in the trash, Chang said.

The machine has a 95 percent precision rate, and could process 60kg of beans per hour, Chang said.

Priced at about NT\$60,000 each, the machines offer an alternative to imported Japanese models that cost about NT\$650,000 and process 500kg to 1,000kg per hour, he said.

Those models are often used on large farms in western Taiwan, he said.

The smaller capacity and lower price makes the station's machine better suited to the small-scale farming usually seen in Hualien and Taitung counties, Chang said.

"Farms in western Taiwan are geographically centralized and larger in scale, making factory farming possible in those areas. However, farms in eastern Taiwan are generally smaller than 5 hectares and are dispersed along the East Rift Valley, which means intensive farming and high-end machinery are not viable options," he said.

A wind sifter could be added to the station's machine to boost the precision rate, and the model could be modified to process black beans, green beans and other produce, he said.

One Hualien farm owner, Su Hsiu-lien (蘇秀蓮), said she used to hire a worker to handpick and sort her soybeans, and it took about six months to sort a season's produce. The station's machine could cut the processing time to less than a month, thereby saving her about NT\$50,000 in personnel costs.

In other news, the council is hosting a mission in revitalizing rural economies in association with the Asian Productivity Organization and the Asian Pacific Association of Agricultural Research Institution, with 42 delegates from 18 nations visiting Taiwan. The delegates have visited six rural communities in northern Taiwan during their five-day stay.

Council of Agriculture Minister Chen Bao-ji (陳保基) on Monday said that the council's rural revitalization program, started in 2010, aims to redevelop rural communities through new economic models, such as primary processing and agricultural tourism.

Rural revitalization is key to motivating young people to stay in agriculture, Chen said, adding that the council plans to include all 4,000 rural communities nationwide in the revitalization program by 2020.

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