

Uganda Sets Ambitious Goals To Increase Coffee Output

CoffeeNetwork (Medellin)- Uganda, Africa's largest coffee exporter, has ambitious plans to multiply by five coffee output, but coffee analysts said the target is unrealistic.

Uganda, Africa's second largest coffee producing nation, plans to boost production to around 20 million 60-kg in the 2023-2024 coffee year, up from the 4.2 million 60 kg bags in the 2016-2017 propelled by increased productivity at existing plantations, Vincent Bamulangaki Ssempiija, Uganda's Minister of Agriculture, Animal, Industry and Fisheries told CoffeeNetwork.

"We want to regain our position as one of the world's largest coffee producers. In Uganda, our productivity is about 500 kilos per hectare, and we plan to increase it to around 3,500 kilos per hectare in five years by helping farmers improve their agronomical practices, get access to financing, support those investments, replace old tree with newer trees, and improve more varieties," Ssempiija told CoffeeNetwork on the sidelines of the World's Coffee Producers Forum.

The government of Uganda, located in East Africa, is investing roughly US\$20 million per year in coffee farms, but investment is higher as private investors are disbursing additional funds to improve coffee plantations.

Uganda, which was one the world's top five coffee producers in the 1960's, wants to regain its leading position as coffee remains of vital importance, earning on average just short of 60% of annual export revenues. It is estimated that as much as 20% of the entire population earn all or a large part of their cash income from coffee.

Uganda's 2017-2018 coffee crop is pegged at 4.35 million 60kg bags, according to USDA. USDA has said that in the past five years, there has been an increase in coffee land, covering at least 239,175 hectares of land.

Uganda is pressured to increase production, mainly high-quality Robusta beans as the world's largest coffee roasters met the president of Uganda Yoweri Museveni two years ago, and expressed interest in buying higher amounts of Robusta.

About 70% of Uganda's total coffee output is Robusta beans, making it one of the world's major Robusta producers, and the balance is Arabica. Coffee is grown in different highland areas of the country, most notably on the slopes of Mount Elgon, on the border with Kenya and on the slopes of Mount Rwenzori, popularly known as the 'mountains of the moon' which borders the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

Uganda has approximately 500,000 smallholder coffee farms, each covering less than 2.4 acres. At least 1.7 million households depend on the coffee production as their main source of income.

Speaking to 1,200 attendees at the coffee Forum in Medellin (Colombia), Ssempiija said the forum will cement and foster robust cooperation among coffee producing countries as Uganda needs to establish a strong collaboration "in areas of research and sharing the best practices with each other including availability of germplasm for drought tolerance, diseases and fertilizer management."

Ssempiija also said local coffee consumption in Uganda is still low, as it is in several other African countries. "This presents a considerable potential in the medium and short term, particularly given the economic development in the African producing countries."

According to the Uganda Coffee Federation, local consumption is around 3% of production.

UNREALISTIC TARGET

Uganda's goal to multiply production by five seems unrealistic, Maja Wallengreen, an independent coffee analyst based in Mexico. She said Brazil, with more access to funds, credit and technology than any other coffee country has "only been able to increase production very gradually over the 20-25 years by 1 million 60-kg bags. This has taken over 20 years to double production," she said. Wallengreen pointed that Brazil needed to invest \$7 billion to plant 10 million bags of new coffee.

Wallengreen said Uganda used to produce 3 million bags back in 1997, and wanted to expand to 5 million bags but despite some gains to close to 3.8 million bags, they were never able to surpass that growth.

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