

AN OVERVIEW OF ONION PRODUCTION IN SRI LANKA

Dr. S.D.I.E. Gunawardena
Director of Agriculture
Department of Agriculture
Peradeniya

Sri Lanka imports annually about 34,000 metric tons (mt) of large onion valued at approximately Rs 300 million (average for 1984-1988). If the country is to be self-sufficient in onions, local production must be increased by about 400 percent. Cultivation of the crop, which has specific environmental requirements, is presently restricted to a few agro-ecological regions of the Dry Zone. It should be possible, however, to cultivate it in other areas if appropriate production technologies are developed in respect to adapted varieties, fertilizer and water management, and cultural practices.

In this context, the experience with red onion cultivation is worth mentioning. Red onion cultivation was confined to the northern part of the country until it was recently extended to non-traditional areas, thus promoting off-season production. This extension was made possible by identification of suitable agro-ecological regions and development of appropriate management practices. A similar approach for large onion could result in production gains and regular supplies.

Selection of new areas for large onion cultivation must be done with caution because of the crop's specific requirements. In addition, an indiscriminate increase in production could lead to market gluts and losses due to the perishable nature of this commodity. Unplanned production of both large and red onion could result in highly variable prices. Therefore, off-season production and storage facilities are two instruments which could stabilize prices and protect the interests of both producers and consumers.

The cultivation of red and large onions requires about 500 and 600 person days of labor per hectare (ha), respectively. It is estimated that approximately 45 million labor units are employed annually in onion production. Thus, increasing onion production will provide gainful employment as well as saving scarce foreign exchange. It is evident that a policy to promote and support increased onion production is urgently needed.

Specifically, the following support is needed:

- a) Recognition of onion as an important crop in saving foreign exchange and promoting employment
- b) Restriction of large onion imports during periods when local production reaches the market. Such restriction should be based on advice from the Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Cooperatives to the Ministry of Trade and Shipping dependent on production information supplied by the Department of Agriculture (DOA).
- c) Implementation of a sliding floor price scheme to encourage storage and off-season production
- d) Cooperatives and other state-controlled purchasing agencies should be compelled to purchase their immediate requirements of onion locally.
- e) Provision of long-term storage (3-5 months) by the Cooperative Wholesale Establishment (CWE) for locally purchased large onion. These facilities should be located in cool, dry areas like Bandarawela because high temperatures and humidity in onion producing areas are not conducive to storage exceeding 2-3 months.
- f) Incentives for growers, dealers and state controlled agencies to provide storage.
- g) Strengthening of research and development on postharvest technology and true seed production of large onion.

I wish to put it on record that this workshop is the first of its kind held in Sri Lanka. There can be no doubt as to its relevance to our economy, particularly in view of the large sums of foreign exchange spent on onion imports and the prospects for further expansion of areas cultivated to large onions. This workshop will provide an opportunity for concerned scientists, administrators and policy makers to review the present status of onion production in the country and to chart strategies to increase its production to meet domestic demand.

I have no doubt that this workshop will provide useful insights into various components of the onion sector, including research, storage and marketing, which will help in policy formulation and eventually lead to self reliance, if not, self sufficiency in this commodity.