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Experts Warn of Future Asia-Pacific Food Vulnerability

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A worker passes a sack of rice to other workers inside a National Food Authority (NFA) warehouse in Taguig City, south of Manila, the Philippines, March 26, 2012.

Ron Corben August 03, 2012 TEXT SIZE

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BANGKOK — Drought in the United States and India is leading to higher food prices and has some experts warning Asia Pacific countries to step up investment in agriculture.

Across the globe there is an increased focus on the challenge of producing enough food as the global population is predicted to reach nine billion by 2050.

While drought in the United States and India has increased prices on some commodities, overall the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), said there are still adequate supplies of most key commodities.

Asia drought predicted

But the U.K.-based Center for Low Carbon Futures, a network of universities, said in a new report that within 10 years large parts of Asia may face long periods of severe drought.

The threat from global climate change comes as rice and wheat yields in Asia are declining, said Paul Teng, a professor and senior fellow at

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Asia are declining, said Paul Teng, a professor and senior fellow at Singapore's Nanyang Technological University.

"Just the simple arithmetic tells us that we're not going to be able to meet the numbers unless significant investments are made to increase productivity under current land scenarios or unless we find more new land for farming or unless we stop using city space for farming," said Teng.

Asia imports almost 70 percent of the world's soybeans from North and Latin America and around 40 percent of the world's tradable corn, largely for animal feed.

In the United States, corn prices have surged to record highs amid the most severe drought in 50 years with almost 90 percent of the U.S. corn crop in drought-ravaged areas.

Drought and food prices

Teng said the U.S. drought and its effects on food prices should be a "wake-up call" for Asia-Pacific countries.

"It should really be a forewarning for countries to want to invest more, [and] shake off the decline that we've been seeing for the last almost two decades," said Teng. "There's a lot of figures to show that the decline in investment in agriculture, because the world basically got complacent."


Andrew McConville, a communications manager with international agriculture technology company, Syngenta, said the lack of new investment and accessibility to technology to enable farmers to improve productivity has had an impact.

"The immediate impact [of a lack of investment] is not necessarily tangible. But over time it has a cumulative impact and at some point we have to pay the piper, so to speak," said McConville. "You really start to see all of these things come together laid over the top of very high prices as well, so you almost had a perfect storm of factors coming together to really point to the challenges that agriculture faces."

Some countries, such as Indonesia, Cambodia and China, are addressing concerns by investing in new land for farming. In Burma, McConville said positive economic reforms can help lift rice output.

He said China also has responded to the food worry by investing in food production in Australia and New Zealand.

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