

A team of agriculture experts and practitioners from Eritrea last week visited Zambia to learn first-hand about the successful implementation of conservation agriculture in the Southern Africa state. Sponsored by the COMESA Climate Change Initiative, the Eritrean delegation visited government ministries and departments, agriculture research institutions, the Zambia Conservation Farming Unit (CFU), large scale conservation agricultural, commercial farmers; as well as small and medium conservation agriculture practitioners in Zambia.

Speaking at the Secretariat offices, the leader of the Eritrean delegation, Mr Solomon Haile Director in the Eritrean Ministry of Agriculture said that the delegation had learnt a lot from the trip to Zambia. He outlined a number of lessons that he thought had contributed to the success of conservation agriculture in Zambia, including clear government policy and strategy on the practice.

“It is actually much easier for Eritrea to mobilise its population to practice conservation agriculture due to our climatic conditions. With only one rainy season and less than 200 mm of rainfall annually, the Eritrean farmer is not likely to be fooled by “good rains today bad rains tomorrow”. As a result the benefits of CA are likely to be more visible,” he said.

Mr Haile added that his country has started piloting conservation agriculture and promised to scale it out even more. COMESA assured him of support in this endeavour.

Zambia has been implementing conservation agriculture for the last 20 years. According to the COMESA Climate Change Coordinator, Mr Chikakula Miti, 250,000 farmers in Zambia are already practicing it, and the target is to scale it out to 600,000 farmers by the year 2015. With the country's 1.2 million farmers, this means that 50 percent of Zambian farmers will be practicing conservation agriculture.

Conservation agriculture has been defined as, “any practice that reduces, changes or eliminates soil tillage and avoids the burning of residue in order to maintain adequate surface cover throughout the year”. Its benefits include environmental protection, and land, labour, water, and soil nutrients are all saved. It improves soil structure and protects the soil against erosion and nutrient loss by maintaining a permanent soil cover and minimizing soil disturbance. Since there is minimum tillage, conservation agriculture actually saves labour as the land is not cleared before planting. It also involves less weeding due to the fact that soil cover moisture is not lost to the atmosphere, increasing the farm yields several fold.

COMESA has over the last few years been facilitating farmers and agricultural officers to visit countries in the region that have successfully adopted conservation agriculture.

The Secretariat has since 2008 been working with the Conservation Farming Units in Eastern and Southern Africa to scale out the practice to the Member States of Ethiopia, Kenya, Uganda, Malawi, Zambia and Zimbabwe. The Eritrean delegation was in Zambia from 14-18 January 2013.