

OWC drive revives coffee farming

By Geoffrey Mutegeki

Coffee farmers across the country have a target of planting 900 million seedlings by 2020 according to Maj. James Nkojo, the spokesperson of Operation Wealth Creation (OWC).

The project, he says is jointly spearheaded by OWC and Uganda Coffee Development Authority (UDCA).

Coffee is one of three strategic crops which President Yoweri Museveni directed OWC to focus on as a strategy of transforming the lives of 68% of Ugandans who are still engaged in subsistence agriculture. Other crops include tea and fruits such as mangoes, oranges and pineapples.

According to Nkojo, when OWC was set up in 2013, Uganda was producing three million bags of coffee annually. This has increased to more than four million bags of coffee with a capacity 60kg each.

"We are a game changer in the coffee sector. Under OWC the army has deployed experts to advise farmers on how best to plant coffee seedlings," Nkojo says.

Over the last two years, over 170 million coffee seedlings have been distributed to farmers.

According to Nkojo, OWC is



Joseph Nkandu, the executive director, National Union of Agribusiness and Farm Enterprises (NUCAFE) with coffee seedlings ready to be offloaded for planting

working with parish chiefs and extension workers to ensure that the seedlings are planted and looked after well.

"Together with UCDA, we have rehabilitated the National Coffee Research Institute (NaCORI) to get improved varieties," Nkojo says.

The National Agricultural Research Organisation (NARO) and Uganda Grain Council have to approve

the seedlings before distribution to ensure that quality and high standards are adhered to.

Nkojo, however, calls for tougher laws to regulate the coffee sector in order to address challenges such as harvesting immature coffee.

"Our officers have sensitised the farmers on the importance of harvesting mature coffee. There is steady progress and in extreme

cases we have arrested people, who harvest coffee which is not ready," he says.

In addition, the agricultural Police unit has been set up and OWC is strengthening its legal mandate.

While meeting coffee farmers in Fort Portal recently, Francis Chesang, the director of development services at UCDA, said the organisation together with districts countryside is

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planning to recruit extension agents at every parish. This is aimed at solving the high rate at which coffee seedlings die.

According to a survey by joint teams of OWC and UCDA officials in 2016, it was discovered that only 40% of the coffee seedlings distributed to farmers survived to maturity.

Joseph Mugisa, a farmer from Rwimi in Kabarole district, however, says the Government needs to invest more in sensitising farmers on the best agronomic coffee farming practices.

"Some people need to know what it takes to grow coffee. Issues of drying seedlings can be minimised if people are sensitised," he says.