

# **Sacred Oxen Signal Thai Rice Recovery as Farmers Await Rain**

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This year may be a better one for Thai rice production. At least, that's what two sacred oxen and a ceremonial lord forecast at the country's annual ploughing ceremony.

**Brahmin priests offered seven types of food and drink to the oxen, including hay and rice liquor, with what the animals consume giving an outlook for the season.** This year, farmers can look forward to average rainfall and plentiful cereals, fruit and food. At the ancient rite held Monday in Bangkok, a senior agriculture ministry official given the title of 'lord of the ceremony' selected one of three pieces of cloth of varying lengths. His choice indicated average rain.



[Maha Vajiralongkorn, crown prince of Thailand, attend ceremony at Sanam Luang park in Bangkok on May 9. Photographer: Dario Pignatelli/Bloomberg](#)

It's a welcome prediction for Thai farmers seeking a reprieve from El Nino-induced dry weather that cut last season's rice crop to a 15-year low. More rain may help the main harvest increase for the first time in three years in 2016-17. The farm ministry predicts rain may fall in the first half of May, earlier than last year, aiding central plain farmers who have suffered from the worst drought in more than two decades.

"I am so happy about the bullish prediction," Santad Wattanakoon, a 56-year-old farmer from Uthai Thani in northern Thailand, said by phone. "I would double acreage during the main crop planting to a normal level" of 100 rai (39.5 acres) after cutting planting due to drought, he said.



**Officials stand with oxen in a stall before the Royal Ploughing Ceremony. Photographer: Dario Pignatelli/Bloomberg**

The main crop, which is typically planted from this month and accounts for about 80 percent of output, may increase to 25.2 million tons from 23.5 million tons a year earlier, according to estimates by the Office of Agricultural Economics. Exports from the world's top shipper are set to decline to about 9 million tons from 9.8 million tons last year, it predicts.

### **Track Record**

**The oxen sometimes get it wrong.** Last year, they indicated average rainfall and abundant crops and the ceremony's lord predicted plentiful rain. Instead, the strongest El Nino since the record event of 1997-98 caused widespread drought and saw key reservoirs fall to the lowest since 1994. Total rice production, including the main and second crop, fell to 27.42 million tons in 2015-16, the lowest since 2000-01, according to the Office of Agricultural Economics.

Prices of Thai 5-percent white rice, a regional benchmark, have surged 14 percent to \$399 a ton after touching the lowest since 2007 in September. Rough-rice futures in Chicago are down 5.5 percent this year. Global inventories are poised to

drop 13 percent to 90.2 million tons in 2015-16 amid smaller crops in Asia, the U.S. Department of Agriculture predicts.



**Officials guide oxen as they pull a plow through the soil. Photographer: Dario Pignatelli/Bloomberg**

The 2015-16 El Nino that brought drought to Southeast Asia is entering its final weeks, according to Australia's Bureau of Meteorology. There's a 50 percent chance of La Nina forming later this year, it forecasts. The weather pattern can bring wetter weather to parts of Australia and Asia.

### **Too Optimistic**

Even if there's a turnaround in the weather, predictions for a rebound in rice output may be too optimistic. Water in key reservoirs is only enough for consumption until July and not for farming, the Thai farm ministry said April 20. Farmers were advised to start planting rainy season crops from July.



**Attendees collect 'sacred' rice grains from the ground after the ceremony. Photographer: Dario Pignatelli/Bloomberg**

And while the farm ministry is predicting a rebound in its main crop, total production is forecast to decline 0.8 percent to 27.2 million tons in 2016-17. The government is set to update its estimate closer to planting of the second crop in November.

"It is too early to say now how much farmers could produce this year as we have to see the water supply situation," said Manat Kitprasert, president of Thai Rice Mills Association. Still, the forecast for sufficient rainfall "gives farmers some hope that it will be a better year," he said.

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