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Trichoderma fungus to benefit farmers

GAZIPUR, FEB 5: International experts attended a meeting on integrated pest management at the Bangladesh Agricultural Research Institute (BARI) on February 2 and 3 in Gazipur to discuss ways to improve the lives of farmers, says a press release.

One of the most promising ways is to use Trichoderma, a beneficial fungus.

Rebeka Sultana knows that a small investment in a fungus can mean the difference between a family having enough to eat and going without. Sultana is Executive Director of Grameen Krishak Sahayak Sangstha, an NGO in Bogra, Bangladesh started with the help of the US Agency for International Development (USAID).

The fungus in question is Trichoderma sp.-a beneficial organism that eats 'bad' fungi that attack and destroy crops. Trichoderma is making a difference in countries across South Asia, as farmers adopt the practice of treating seeds with it, preemptively protecting their plants from disease.

Scientists with the USAID-funded Feed the Future Food Security Innovation Lab: Collaborative Research on Integrated Pest Management, managed by Virginia Tech, are using Trichoderma to combat a range of fungal diseases affecting high-value onion, brinjal (eggplant) and tomato crops.

On Tuesday, a team of these scientists accompanied by USAID personnel will be visiting Sultana's company. The team includes Marty McVey, a member of the Board for International Food and Agricultural Development, the body that oversees the US government's efforts to support agriculture in the developing world.

"I believe that it is supporting the small farmers that we will raise the standard of living of people in developing countries," said McVey.

In Bangladesh, the use of Trichoderma has already had a significant impact on farmer's livelihoods. Its incorporation into soil results in healthier plants as it combats soil-borne fungal diseases that can cause seedling and plant mortality, wiping out whole fields of a vegetable crop.

"Trichoderma is easy to produce, and in addition to helping farmers regains their livelihood, it has created a new source of income," said Muni Muniappan, director of the Innovation Lab on Integrated Pest Management. "It has been a godsend in treating fungal diseases in developing countries."

In Sultana's case, farmers look up to and trust her.

This has resulted in their eager adoption of her sustainable, economical techniques.

Over the past five years, Sultana has been producing, packaging, and marketing compost with trichoderma in a product called 'Tricho-compost'. In Sultana's first year of production, nearly 200 farmers, impressed with the performance of the Tricho products, began using them instead of chemical fertilizers that are ten times more expensive.

Tricho-compost users have also expressed great satisfaction with regards to the quality and market demand of the produce.

Vegetables from plants treated with trichoderma fetch higher prices than those produced from non-treated plants. McVey notes, "By visiting Sultana's woman-owned company, we hope to see how we can replicate her success with other women farmers across South Asia."

GAZIPUR: International experts at a discussion meeting on integrated pest management at BARI in the district on February 2.