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CLIMATE CHANGE SUMMIT METHANE EMISSIONS CONCLUSION

Incredulity greets rice field warning

Fear finding may hurt country's rice output

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The world scientific body on climate change's conclusion that paddy fields are one of the main causes of rising methane emissions has upset the Agriculture Department and the Thai Farmers Association, which fear the finding could hurt the country's rice production.

Agriculture chief Adisak Sreesunpagit yesterday said he did not deny the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's (IPCC) finding that flooded rice paddy fields emit methane, but the amount of the heat-trapping gas emitted by the

farm sector was far less than by other sectors, he said.

"It is premature to talk about reform of rice-growing methods as a global warming mitigation measure. The major culprits [in greenhouse gas emissions] are industrialised nations, not agricultural countries like us," said Mr Adisak.

Thailand has about 55 million rai of paddy fields, he said. Methane emissions come mainly from only two to three million rai of irrigated areas where the farmers flood their fields almost year-round, leading to fermentation of organic matter which releases the gas.

The IPCC is meeting this week in Bangkok. Mr Adisak said the Thai delegation should make sure the issue is "fairly" addressed in the final report on climate change mitigation coming out tomorrow.

Methane is a greenhouse gas which



ane in the atmosphere has almost tripled in the last 150 years.

Methane comes from various sources, including coal mining, landfills, natural gas production, rice paddies, livestock farms, and mangrove forests.

Scientists suggest rice farmers periodically drain their fields and stop burning rice straw from the previous crop to cut methane and carbon dioxide emissions.

Suwan Kathawut, president of the Thai Farmers Association, said shallow flooding of paddy fields was a traditional rice-growing practice.

has the second greatest effect on climate change, after carbon dioxide. The concentration of meth-

The water would be kept in the field throughout the four-month cropping period to prevent invasion by weeds and to enhance rice growth.

"To periodically drain water out of the field does not make sense at all. How can we grow rice without water in the field?" Mr Suwan said.

Draining water from the paddies would also increase costs and water demand, he said. Farmers could not stop burning leftover rice husks either.

He had no idea how the rice paddies came to be seen as a major source of greenhouse gas emissions and said farmers were not prepared to reform their rice-growing practices.

"The cost of complying with the scientists' recommendation is too high," he said.

Bhichit Rattakul, director of the Asian

Disaster Preparedness Centre, said asking rice farmers to drain water from paddies was unfair.

"The whole point is that the energy, industrial and transport sectors are the major culprits and the Kyoto Protocol called for industrialised nations to reduce emissions from these sectors. They are trying to pass blame to the farm sector in poor countries," he said.

Mr Bhichit said reforming rice production could result in a worsening of water shortages and lead to fighting over water resources.

Chatri Chuayprasit, deputy permanent secretary of the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment, said paddy farming reform was only one of many issues that around 400 scientists and government officials from 120 countries have discussed at the climate meeting.