Acacia Seyal (Gum Arabica Producing species)

It is now confirmed. Uganda has the acacia senegal and acacia seyal trees used for producing Gum Arabic with high demand in the US market. The tree grows wild in Sebei, Teso regions and the bulk of it in the Karamoja region stretching to the Sudan border. The three regions cover a total area of 43,262.5 square kilometres. Gum arabic samples from this region, will be taken to the US $48billion annual market, for tests, success of which will open an automatic door for Uganda to export directly to the US duty and quota free, under the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA). “If the samples pass the functionality tests, then we shall start buying and exporting to the US. Let us just keep our fingers crossed,” Anthony Nwachukwu, the president of Atlantic Gum Corporation, the world's largest importers of Gum Arabic said, during a tour to the Karamoja region where the crop grows abundantly. “It is not just my company, but many other US companies will be involved. I am just here to tell them whether it is possible to buy from Uganda or not,” Nwachukwu said.

“We will also train the people in modern methods of harvesting the gum. We hope to get funding from USAID. We did it in Chad and Nigeria. There is no reason why we can’t do it here,” he added. President Yoweri Museveni’s assistant on AGOA and other trade related matters, Mrs Susan Muhwezi, who took Nwachukwu on a tour of the area said: “I am confident that there is no way all the samples from these regions can not pass the tests. I am hopeful that something good will come out of this belt.” She said if the products pass the tests, arrangements to demarcate and protect the areas that the trees are grown, will be developed. “This is an opportunity to develop Karamoja. It looks a dream now, but when it takes off, many people will benefit,” Muhwezi said. The AGOA technology specialist, Yorokamu Katwiremu, economic analyst, Benson Byaruhanga and water, lands and environment assistant commissioner, Rachael Musoke were also part of the tour.

Musoke said according to the research done by her ministry, an average acacia tree yields between 400 and 7,000 grams of gum per annum, while up to between 425 and 1,700 trees of acacia senegal can be grown per hectare of land.

“There is a potential of growing billions of trees in Karamoja region alone,” she said. She said the trees grow wild in 36 other districts in northern Uganda and south western and central Uganda.

She added that based on the 1991 Sudanese figures, the price of Gum Arabic cab vary from $850 to $2,800 per tonne of hand picked acacia senegal gum.

The Sudan is the largest producer of gum arabic and was until a few years ago, the world’s largest exporter before the US slapped an embargo on them.

Musoke said currently, a kilogramme of Gum Arabic goes for $3 on the European market. Moroto Resident District Commissioner, Keem Napaja said the gum in the region is currently used by pastoralists as food, while some is used for mending broken pots and fixing spears and arrows. It is also used in the construction of kraals and manyattas.

Gum arabic is used in the production of sweets, chewing gum, food flavours, confectioneries, paints and other industrial products.

It is cultivated from species of acacia senegal and acacia seyal that naturally grow mainly in sub-Saharan Africa. Uganda is trying for the first time to cash in on the trade.

Napaja said the Karimojong will now know the benefits of land ownership, as opposed to the current customary land system. “Coffee is to western, central and eastern Uganda, as Gum Arabic will be to the Karimojong. The Karimojong will now know that nature is not for nothing,” Napaja said. He says the region has great potential and looks forward to seeing the project take off. (New Vision 31st-oct-2002)