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China gives green light for farmers to subcontract farmland

Li Liushu, a farmer-turned-migrant worker in central China's Henan Province, leased two fifths of a hectare of farmland to his neighbor six years ago.

The lease was made without any official contract because subcontracting farmland usage rights was not officially recognized at the time.

However, such leases have been officially encouraged in the Communist Party's latest policy document on rural development released on Sunday, which called for farmers' "entitlement to subcontract, rent, exchange, transfer and swap their land-use rights."

"By leasing the farmland, I got a stable annual rent of 200 yuan (\$30) and bade farewell to the farm work," said 33-year-old Li.

He left Henan's Zhangzhuang Village for a construction job in the provincial capital of Zhengzhou. He leased his farmland to save the trouble of going back to the fields during planting and harvesting seasons.

Under the new policy, markets for the lease and transfer of farmland usage rights shall be set up to safeguard the interests of farmers and better document contracts.

In Henan, one of China's major agricultural regions, about 305,000 hectares, or 4.8 percent of the farmland, has been privately leased, according to the Henan Provincial Agricultural Department statistics.

"About two thirds of the land was transferred between relatives, friends or neighbors so the land would not be deserted when farmers went to seek jobs in the city," said senior department official Ding Xinkui.

"The remaining land was transferred as the individual land plots were merged into larger areas to encourage the development of large industrial farms as a way of maximizing the use of the arable land," he said.

Ding predicted that scenario would become more common, when more of the country's 800 million farmers were introduced to the policy.

He pointed out that the policy only allowed farmers to transfer their land usage right rather than the ownership.

According to China's Constitution, all land is owned by the state, while the individual families are permitted to farm their land under 30-year government contracts.

Many farmers who seek work in the cities say they will ultimately return home and want to retain the land rights.

"I would not transfer my land for good," said Li.

He said the household administration system that distinguishes between rural and urban people has long denied farmers access to urban rights and benefits, including pensions and medical coverage.

"If I lost my land, I would be neither a farmer nor an urban resident," he said. "When I am old, I would return to my land – my last and always reliable retreat."

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