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THE HINDU

Terrace gardeners to spread green message



Terrace farming is growing at a fast pace, especially in metros, says Rambabu Karri, a Visakhapatnam-based organic farming expert. Photo: Ch. Vijaya Bhaskar
Application of chemicals in the form of fertilizers and pesticides leads to sediments in the harvested produce because the application (the dosage, the method, duration etc) itself is done in a faulty manner, said Karri Rambabu, organic farming expert from Visakhapatnam.

Addressing a workshop on terrace organic farmers in the city on Sunday, Mr. Rambabu, a native of Polavaram, said he was engaged in a profession of agricultural chemical supplies and consultancy/advice in Visakhapatnam. In the course of his work, he realised how the lack of knowledge among farmers in rural

and remote parts of India about the art and science of applying chemical-based fertilizers was creating havoc in the quality of food that is produced in their field.

This farm produce reached the markets for consumption by the common people. Gradually, he started learning and disseminating knowledge about natural and organic farming and it has been 10 years now. The participants included gardening enthusiasts from Guntur and Visakhapatnam besides Vijayawada and its vicinity.

Surendranath Majety, the guiding force behind the workshop, said the workshop would deal with fundamental aspects of farming on terraces and roofs of buildings without using chemicals and growing vegetables sufficient for a medium size family.

“One should have safe and chemical-free vegetables at affordable cost on one’s plate. Terrace farming is growing at a fast pace, especially in metros, with people realising the importance of organic products and also putting to use vacant space in their houses for productive and healthy purposes,” he said.

Swati Sanyal Tarafdar, writer and freelance journalist, was the convener of the meet. She emphasised the need to adopt a positive activity like terrace organic gardening “for our own physical, mental, and emotional well being.”

Organic farmer from city K.S. Rao, panchakavya expert Prasad, agriculturist Madhusudhan Rao, paediatrician Nori Suryanarayana, gynaecologist N. Anuradha, Principal of Siddhartha Women’s College Visala, who are also terrace gardeners, participated.

The workshop demonstrated the various techniques gardeners should know and understand to prepare the soil for cultivation, to compost waste and prepare manure, to sow the seeds and help them to germinate, to transplant the saplings from the germination trays to individual pots, and all about mulching, and plant care.

Encouraged by good response, the organisers decided to create a group of Vijayawada Terrace Gardeners and continue to strive and spread the goodness of gardening and natural living in the fast moving city of Vijayawada.

Agriculture outperforms industry in Q2

There is no impact of adverse seasonal conditions on farm production, says Chief Minister



Chief Minister N. Chandrababu Naidu at the Collectors' conference in Vijayawada on Monday. Chief Secretary I.Y.R. Subba Rao is seen.—

Despite scanty rainfall this season, the agriculture and allied sector continued to dominate the growth rate in the State during second quarter. The agriculture sector registered growth rate of 47.10 per cent during second quarter (Q2) of 2015-16 financial year, while industry and service sectors registered 6.25 and 8.05 per cents respectively.

The State government could achieve this feat as fishing, horticulture, live stocks sectors were included in agriculture sector. Performance of these sectors was fairly good compared to agriculture per se.

Releasing Q2 performance assessment report at Collectors Conference here on Monday, Chief Minister N. Chandrababu Naidu agreed that the government could not achieve the set targets in agriculture sector though overall performance of agriculture and allied sectors outperformed industry and service sectors.

In fact, there is a slip in growth rate of industry and services sectors compared to last quarter. The industry and services sectors witnessed growth rate of 7.19 per cent and 10.15 per cents in first quarter. The agriculture sector fared well in first quarter also by registering growth rate of 12.52 per cent. According to the report,

the half yearly performance of the agriculture sector is also high compared to corresponding period in 2015-15. The sector achieved a growth of 29.17 per cent in 2015-16 compared to 11.32 per cent during the first half year in 2014-15.

The overall gross value added (GVA) growth rate of agriculture was minus 9.34 per cent during Q2 of 2015-16. Due to adverse seasonal conditions the paddy production decreased by 21.65 per cent. Groundnut production decreased by 7.22 per cent and maize production decreased by 13.77 per cent. “Though adverse seasonal conditions influenced the production of agriculture crops, there is not much impact on the Q2 growth as its contribution,” says Mr. Naidu

The deficit rainfall did not impact the growth rate of agriculture sector per se as the government included horticulture, livestock and fishing. The fishing sector registered overall GVA growth rate of 119.20 per cent during Q2. The overall GVA growth of livestock is 28.34 per cent.

Deputy Chief Minister K.E. Krishna Murthy, Ministers Yanamala Ramakrishnu, Devineni Umamaheswara Rao, Prattipati Pulla Rao, K. Acchennaaidu, Ravela Kishore Babu, Paritala Sunita, P. Narayana, Ganta Srinivasa Rao, Ayyanna Patrudu, Siddha Raghava Rao, K. Mrunalini, Kamineni Srinivas, Kollu Ravindra, Manikyala Rao, Bojjala Gopala Krishna Reddy and Chief Secretary I.Y.R. Krishna Rao, Special Chief Secretary (Planning) S.P. Tucker, Advisor (Communications) Parakala Prabhakar, Collectors and all heads of departments were present.

Coconut nursery planned at Seed Farm



To encourage people grow coconut even in their backyards and increase the overall productivity, the Department of Agriculture is all set to commence a coconut nursery on the State Seed Farm premises at Pongalur for production of hybrid varieties that suit local conditions.

The facility, planned at an outlay of Rs. 23 lakh from the government, will be set up on four acres of the 39.05 acre campus of State Seed Farm.

“This is the first initiative of the kind by the department in the district. In the first set, we plan to raise 30,000 seedlings of Tall X Dwarf variety of coconut. Quantity The quantity will then be gradually increased to a maximum of 45,000 seedlings in every set over the years,” Joint Director of Agriculture A. Mahendran told *The Hindu* .

He added that crossing to produce the hybrid varieties would be carried out at progressive farms, and the farmers would be paid attractive amounts for the nuts procured.

The nuts, thus, procured, will be raised first in the shade on the Seed Farm campus for three months and then under normal conditions for another three to four months before it is sold to farmers/growers.

“We will be distributing the seedlings at Rs. 50 a seedling against the market price of over Rs. 100,” said Mr. Mahendran.

The main benefits cited by the officials in raising the Tall X Dwarf variety vis-a-vis the traditional tall variety are that the hybrid variety would give better yield, and the height of the tree is less. It could be grown in backyards in the congested city environment too apart from raising it in general farms.

The coconut acreage in the district comes to 56,823 ha in the district.

This will go up once the nursery project takes off, said agriculture department officials.

ALL EYES ON NAIROBI

WTO members meet in Kenya to liberalise global trade

INDIA'S PLANK:

Prioritise discussion on huge trade distorting farm subsidies of rich countries and its adverse impact on subsistence farmers in developing countries



RELOOK NEEDED: Reduction in farm subsidies in rich nations, a mandate of the Doha round, is not even a matter of discussion now, said India

CLARION CALL: India has called for removing disparities in agricultural trade rules, which "favour" developed countries

NICHE AGREEMENT: India wants an agreement on Special Safeguard Mechanism and a solution on public stockholding for food security

Cites adverse impact on poor farmers of developing nations

India has stressed the need for the World Trade Organisation (WTO) member countries to take up for discussion on a priority basis at the Nairobi meet beginning on Tuesday the issue of huge trade distorting farm subsidies of the rich countries and its consequent adverse impact on millions of resource poor and subsistence farmers in developing countries.

Ministers from the WTO's 162 member countries are meeting at the Kenyan capital during December 15-18 for negotiations aimed at a deal to liberalise global trade.

Farm lobbies in the rich world have been, for decades, shaping the discourse and determining the destiny of these poor farmers, India — represented by Commerce Minister Nirmala Sitharaman — pointed out during a meeting of the G33 countries

(a coalition of 48 countries demanding flexibility for developing countries in limiting market opening of the agriculture sector).

India said the reduction in the huge subsidies given to the farm sector in the rich countries — which was a clear mandate of the ongoing Doha Round negotiations with a ‘development’ agenda — is now not even a matter of discussion, leave aside serious negotiations.

On the importance of the G-33 countries, New Delhi said they represent the collective voice of over two-thirds of humanity and an overwhelming majority of poor and subsistence farmers.

In another meeting, this time of the G-20 countries, India said the time had come to remove the disparity in agricultural trade rules, biased in favour of developed countries. Concluding the Doha Round negotiations successfully would go a long way in correcting these distortions in agricultural trade, it said.

The G-20 meetings have played a pivotal role in driving the agenda of the agriculture negotiations at the WTO, India said and thanked Brazil for hosting the meeting on Monday.

New Delhi — at the G33 meeting — said there could be no better tribute to the Ministerial Conference (the WTO’s highest decision-making body), taking place in Africa for the first time, than to come up with measures to protect the poor farmers.

Textiles Ministry plans direct benefit transfer to cotton farmers

The Ministry of Textiles plans to implement direct transfer of funds to cotton farmers’ accounts, on an experimental basis, if the price of cotton drops below the Minimum Support Price (MSP), says Textile Commissioner, Kavita Gupta.

The first stage of the project will be rolled out in Arvi taluk, Wardha district of Maharashtra, Gupta, told *The Hindu*.

The taluk was identified for the project as land documents are digitised and the Agriculture Produce Market Committee has better infrastructure.

“We are evolving a mechanism to make the payment directly to the farmers. We are still working on procedural modalities,” she said. The Ministry of Textiles will make available the funds to the state government to be paid to the farmers. The Cotton Corporation of India (CCI) will get into MSP operations as and when required in the cotton-growing states.

The Southern India Mills’ Association (SIMA) has welcomed the Central Government’s decision and said it will benefit the textile industry.

During the last cotton season, the industry paid higher prices for cotton, **especially textile mills in Telangana and Andhra Pradesh** though these are cotton-producing states. China has a system for direct payment of benefits to farmers and the Chinese spinning mills have benefited from it, said the association Chairman, M. Senthil Kumar, in a press statement.

The daily arrival of cotton currently is about 1.60 lakh bales as against nearly 1.4 lakh bales during this period last year, said Vice-President of Indian Cotton Federation, K. N. Viswanathan. Presently, the prices are maintained at about the MSP in most places.

Seminar on December 17

A seminar on opportunities for green house cultivation for cut flowers, capsicum and cucumber will be held at Hotel Sivaraj Holiday Inn on December 17.

A release from K. Elavarasan, convenor – Food and Agri Panel, Confederation of Indian Industry, said that about 65 per cent of the population was dependent on agriculture that had to achieve a higher growth rate targeted at four per cent per annum. Hence, the seminar had been designed to focus on the requirements of the farmers, entrepreneurs and job seekers.

Robert de Bos, an expert from the Netherlands, will speak on green house cultivation – global perspectives and export opportunities while S. Srividya from Tamil Nadu Agricultural University will speak on suitable plants for green house cultivation. N. Jothi Basu from State Horticultural Department will speak on

various schemes and subsidies for the cultivation. An interaction will also be held at the end of the session at 1.30 p.m.

For registration, contact, D. Sreedharan, executive, CII Salem, at 0427-2448255, 99944-99449.

Salem's credit potential pegged at Rs. 4,731.49 crore¹



District Collector V. Sampath handing over a copy of the Potential linked Credit Plan for Salem district to P. Thangavel, Deputy General Manager and Zonal Manager, Indian Bank, at the collectorate on Monday. THE HINDU

The National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development (NABARD) has assessed the credit potential of the Salem district for the 2016-17 at Rs. 4,731.49 crore, registering a 15.9 per cent increase over the current year's projection.

District Collector V. Sampath released the Potential linked Credit Plan (PLP) for 2016-17 prepared by NABARD and P. Thangavel, Deputy General Manager and Zonal Manager, Indian Bank. received the first copy.

A. Bhama Buvaneswari, District Development Manager, NABARD, said that the credit potential for agriculture has been estimated at Rs.3,716.81 crore which includes short term credit of Rs.2,523.28 crore and that of Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises at Rs.396.60 crore. She also added that in terms of the Revised Priority Sector Guidelines of the RBI, credit potential for export and

social Infrastructure through bank credit has been estimated under the PLP for the first time.

With the Nation's priority of housing for all by 2022, the credit potential for housing sector has been estimated at Rs.185.70 crore. The credit potential for education has been estimated at Rs.145.80 crore. She said that NABARD's efforts in assessing increased credit potential for agriculture aiming at increased productivity so as to ensure food security is supplemented with NABARD's support under the Rural Infrastructure Development Fund (RIDF) in creating additional infrastructure for storage of food grains in the district.

Mr. Sampath exhorted the bankers to improve agriculture term lending as capital formation in agriculture is essential to boost production and productivity in agriculture thereby leading to overall economic growth of the country.

P. Thangavel, DGM, Indian Bank, said that the Priority Sector Guidelines have been revised and banks will now have to focus their lending towards small and marginal farmers and micro and small enterprises.

A. Udayakumar, Lead District Manager, said that banks will strive to achieve the priority sector lending targets.

Sorghum products' brand from IIMR going places

State-owned research organisation offering a wide range of foodstuffs under the brand 'Eatrite'

For any frequenter to the retail mall 'Big Bazar' in Hyderabad or Mumbai, it is difficult to miss the brand 'Eatrite'. It is probably the only brand that provides processed and semi-processed food products exclusively made of sorghum, and produced by a State-owned research organisation.

Launched by the Indian Institute of Millet Research (IIMR) — earlier the Directorate of Sorghum Research — 'Eatrite' encompasses a wide range of sorghum products one must have heard of only as made of rice, wheat or maize. Apart from sorghum flour and 'rawa', jowar vermicelli, jowar flakes, jowar pasta, jowar idli rawa, jowar roasted flakes, jowar dosa batter, jowar khichdi rawa, jowar

ready idli mix and even jowar cookies/biscuits are marketed under the brand at a pocket-friendly price range of Rs. 15 to Rs. 50.

Eatrite is a brand laboriously built and marketed by IIMR, the arm of the Indian Council for Agricultural Research, solely for popularising millets as healthy food option.

One would be amazed by the research that went into developing sorghum cultivars suitable for making each of these products, customising available machinery for sorghum processing, and developing a value chain from scratch and marketing the product.

The exercise had begun seven years ago, when it was found that per capita consumption of millets in rural as well as urban areas was falling drastically over the decades. Processing inconvenience, lack of knowledge, and changing consumer preference were identified as major gaps in millet promotion.

Pilot project

A pilot project of developing a sorghum value chain from production to consumption was then initiated in PPP model, with funding from National Agricultural Innovation Project. National Institute of Nutrition, State Agricultural Universities and Central Food Technological Research Institute were roped in along with private partners such as ITC and Britannia.

Over 1,500 beneficiary farmers were supported in cultivation of 10 product-specific sorghum cultivars in 3,000 acres. Processes for 30 products were developed, and an equal number of processing machineries were retrofitted and standardised. Marketing interventions included extensive campaigns and advertisements through audio-visual media, informed B. Dayakar Rao, Principal Scientist and Principal Investigator, Centre of Excellence at the IIMR which houses the Value Addition and Food Processing Technology Park.

Set up three years ago with the goals of entrepreneurship development and commercial production, the Centre of Excellence now has the production capacity

of 20,000 units annually amounting to 15 to 20 tonnes of Eatrite products. “If we include the technology licensees, the production may be said to be approximately 10 times of our current production,” says Dr. Rao who is the brain behind the project.

Future plans include adding six more products to the existing nine, bringing in millets other than sorghum, scaling up of the production through an incubation centre, and expanding to NCR-Delhi. The Agricultural and Processed Food Products Export Development Authority (APEDA) approved funding to the tune of Rs.7.5 crore for establishment of the incubation centre with a semi-commercial plant, said Dr.Rao, and added that another proposal for brand franchising is under consideration.

‘Will buy adequate certified seed potato for next year’

Already, efforts are on in this direction: Deputy Director



B. Suma, Deputy Director of Horticulture, speaking at a workshop on vegetable seeds at Kandali, near Hassan, on Monday.

The Horticulture Department will procure adequate quantity of certified seeds of potato for cultivation next year, said B. Suma, Deputy Director of Horticulture, on Monday.

Ms. Suma was speaking at a workshop on vegetable seeds organised by the Krishi Vigyana Kendra (KVK) at Kandali, near here.

“Every year, we face shortage of certified seeds for potato cultivation in Hassan, which is a major producer of potato. We have already begun efforts in this regard. Three meetings have been held with the authorities concerned on the issue,” she said.

Kokila, Deputy Director of Agriculture, said that farmers could earn well by cultivating vegetables.

“If farmers equip themselves with advanced technology, they can improve their earnings,” she said.

KVK convener B.S. Basavaraju and others were present.

12 lakh tonnes of paddy yield expected in Krishna

Nearly 12 lakh metric tonnes of paddy production is expected in Krishna district, despite above 50,000 hectares of land was left unsown due to lack of timely rains in the 2015 Kharif season. Of them total 2.55 lakh hectares of normal acreage of paddy cultivation in Kharif season in the district, paddy was sown in 2.5 lakh hectares in the 2015 Kharif.

“Given the yield per acre, the paddy production would go nearly 12 lakh metric tonnes in the Kharif 2015. Maximum of yield of 40 to 43 bags per acre has been recorded in several mandals in Krishna district. Output of 43 bags per acre is said to be the decade’s highest yield”, Agriculture Department Joint Director Mr. Balu Naik told The Hindu.

The annual paddy production in Krishna district was 11 and 14 lakh metric tonnes in the 2013 and 2014 Kharif seasons respectively.

Mr. Balu Naik has added that bumper yield has been reported in the paddy fields those survived the drought. On the other hand, the district authorities have targeted to procure 6.4 lakh metric tonnes of paddy through Paddy Purchasing Centres, ensuring Minimum Support Price to the farmer apart from promising marketing facility at the village level.

The harvesting operations of paddy are in full swing across the Krishna district and expected to complete by December end.

Students of agri college conduct camp

Students of Adhiprasakthi Agriculture College, Kalavai conducted an organic farming camp as part of their Rural Agricultural Work Experience Programme recently.

Seven final year students of the college individually and as a group worked with farmers of Athiyanthal, Pandithapattu, Aadaiyur, Kosalai and Kananthampoondi near Tiruvannamalai. The students shared their technical knowledge with the farmers who in turn enlightened the students with their field experience.

Part of their technical dissemination underscores the importance of organic farming.

Farmers were taught the nuances of making organic farming fluids such as Amirtha Karaisal, Pancha Kavya, Neer Mor Karaisal, apart from training them in the System of Rice Intensification (SRI), Sustainable Sugarcane Initiative (SSI), Seed Treatment in groundnut and pulses and Succour Treatment in banana.

The students also organised training camps for farmers in Kottangal and Adi Annamalai villages.

They conducted rallies to spread awareness about organic farming and the ill effects of accumulating disposable plastics.

Prices of onion crash in Dindigul market

Wet and semi-perished onions were not sold even for Rs.5 a kg

With a spurt in arrival of shallots (small onions) from the major production centres of Uraiyr and Gujiliamparai, the wholesale onion market in Dindigul, one of the biggest markets in the State, witnessed a crash in prices of shallot varieties.

The sudden crash of prices in a span of 10 days has puzzled the traders and farmers. The prices of shallots that hovered between Rs.85 (top quality) and Rs.70 a kg (medium quality) last month came down to Rs.20 and Rs.10 a kg respectively on Monday.

The recent showers affected shallot production in major onion production centres in the State and hit regular arrivals from Theni, Andipatti, Dharapuram and Udumalpet.

While the rains damaged standing crop in many areas in the district, farmers managed to harvest the onions and brought them to market. Since they have a poor shelf life, fresh onions did not attract the traders.

Onions that were wet and semi-perished condition were not sold even for Rs.5 a kg. Though the yield was good in many places, the quality of onions was not upto desired levels, said onion traders.

The market received 4,000 bags on Monday, of which the arrival from domestic production centres, especially Ayyalur, Eriyodu and Gujiliamparai, was around 2,500 bags. Exports also did not pick up much owing to fresh arrivals of onions. Exporters preferred only matured shallots that were completely dry. Normally, fresh shallots from the field would be damp and the shelf-life short, they added. The market received 1,500 bags of old onions. “When we get a good yield, we face only a loss,” said S. Murugan, a farmer from Gujiliamparai.

Big onions

The prices of big onions imported from Egypt also crashed to Rs.18 a kg on Monday from Rs.52 a kg at the time of import. Each onion weighed around 250 to 400 grams. The traders send this variety to urban markets.

But the prices of big onion are stable at Rs.35 a kg in the wholesale market and Rs.45 a kg at farmers’ market in Dindigul.

Coconut farmers to gain from recent heavy rains

Coconut farmers in Modakurichi block in the district where the crop has been raised on 3,200 hectares have a cause to heave a sigh of relief.

A stable groundwater position ensured by the recent spell of monsoon rains was expected to enhance productivity substantially, official sources said.

A year ago, the farmers were in an unenviable situation as the preceding years of drought-like conditions caused drying up of several hundreds of trees. The

compensation for a withered tree ranged from a mere Rs. 500 to Rs. 1,000, based on the yield.

With comfortable water level in ponds and tanks, the crop would be robust for the next one year, official sources said, adding that the semi-dry trees would also spring back to life.

Water availability being a most important requirement of the coconut palm for the production of nuts, irrigation was necessary at places where groundwater was not sufficient.

Farmers said tall trees were more tolerant of drought than hybrids and dwarfs. Those who had opted to raise hybrids, that yield more nuts in conditions of regular water supply, suffered more when the conditions remained dry for years at a stretch. Preceded by loss in yield, palms eventually succumbed to the drought.

Researches indicated that heavily bearing palms suffered more from drought than less productive palms. The productivity was bound to be more when the crops were irrigated in dry conditions.

Coconut palms were highly sensitive to water deficit conditions in terms of overall photosynthetic activity. Farmers could rest assured that water accrued from the monsoon rains would provide them substantial economic returns for the next one year, official sources said.

Progressive farmers in Modakurichi and Kodumudi block have installed drip irrigation system to optimise water utilisation and cut down on dependence on labourers.

Paddy procurement begins

Procurement of 3.50 lakh metric tonnes of paddy at the 136 purchasing centres in the district began on Monday. As there is a possibility of procuring 5.50 lakh MT of paddy, Joint Collector Sriresh Balaji has directed millers and farmers to cooperate and cross the targeted 3.50 lakh MT.

At a meeting with millers, Mr. Balaji asked them to pay Rs. 1,450 per quintal for A-grade variety and Rs. 1,410 for common variety. In addition to 109 paddy purchasing centres that are being organised by Velugu and 27 by PACS, efforts are on to open 53 more centres, he told them.

However, he warned millers of action if they resorted to irregularities. Stating that 74 of the 134 millers had so far issued bank guarantees, he asked the remaining millers to submit the same immediately.

All transactions must be done online for transparency, he directed the civil supply officials. District Manager (Civil Supplies) Ganapathi Rao, DRDA Project Director Dilli Rao and millers were present.

Bananas for free as growers upset over crash in price



Farmers distributing bananas to public at free of cost at Pannaipuram near Uthamapalayam in Theni district on Monday.

A section of banana growers has started distributing the fruits free of cost to people at Pannaipuram near Uthamapalayam here on Monday as the procurement price of hybrid variety crashed to Re 1 a kg. They travel in vans and give away bananas to people on the road.

Farmers were ready to sell a bunch of banana (each bunch weighs around 35 to 37 kg) even for Rs. 2 a kg, but there were no takers. “We know that Rs.2 a kg will not even meet cutting charges. We are forced to sell at such a rock bottom price to clear the field,” said P. Soundara Pandian, a banana grower at Uthamapuram in Cumbum.

Each farmer had to shell out minimum Rs.2.5 lakh to raise banana on an acre. It would cost around Rs.35,000 to clear the field after the harvest. Such a low procurement price would not meet any of the expenses, he added. Now, the situation was very pathetic as farmers could neither leave the bananas in the tree nor keep them in cold storage. Bananas with 70 per cent maturity level alone could be kept in cold storage and ripened further when in need. Already, the bananas had reached cent per cent maturity in the tree itself, the growers said. "If we allow fruits to perish, they will not be useful to anyone. At least, free distribution will benefit common man. Otherwise the fruits will perish in the farm," a farmer said. About 30 tonnes of banana had to be thrown on roadside as the lorries carrying the fruits could not enter Chennai and Cuddalore during the floods, said traders. Wholesale traders in Chennai had struggled to push huge stock owing to flood. Transportation of fruits to retail outlets had become a daunting task. Traders in Cuddalore, Kancheepuram, Vellore and Villupuram districts too had scaled down their off-take substantially owing to rains. Banana is being cultivated on 6,500 hectares in the district.

Farmers to get receipt of crop insurance premium

Madhya Pradesh Co-operative and Panchayat Minister Gopal Bhargava on Monday assured the Assembly that receipts will be provided to farmers for the premium paid by them under crop insurance scheme.

Raising the issue during the Question Hour, Congress legislator Sachin Yadav said farmers were not getting any proof of the premium they were paying under the crop insurance scheme.

Mr Yadav was joined by senior Congress member Ramniwas Rawat who said that the issue was very important given that during distress the farmers were finding it difficult to claim the crop insurance.

Agriculture Minister Gaurishanker Bisen assured the members that he would look into the issue, admitting that farmers were not getting receipt against premium. Dissatisfied with Mr Bisen's reply, Congress member Nishank Kumar Jain alleged that under the garb of crop insurance scheme, farmers were being cheated by the

agriculture department and cooperative banks as they were not getting any document or receipt against payment of premium.

Following mounting pressure from the Opposition, Speaker Sitasharan Sharma intervened and said the issue needed to be addressed, as it was linked to farmers.

Minister Gopal Bhargava then assured the House that farmers will get receipt and required documents against payment of premium under crop insurance policy.

The directive in this regard would be issued today itself, he added. -- PTI

During distress the farmers are finding it difficult to claim the insurance, says Opposition

Discuss farm subsidies of rich, says India

India wanted an agreement on a Special Safeguard Mechanism (SSM) and on a permanent solution on public stockholding for food security purposes.

SSM is a trade remedy which is important for developing countries as it will allow them to temporarily hike duties to counter sudden import surges and price falls of farm products due to the heavily subsidised agricultural imports from developed countries, it said.

India asked the G33 countries to stand united, and collectively send out a message that the Nairobi Ministerial Declaration should be balanced and cover all the elements of the Doha Development Agenda.

Karavetti sanctuary attracts more and more birds

Forest Department has created new infrastructure to encourage nature-lovers

Arrival of winged visitors to the bird sanctuary at Karaivetti from different parts has been on the rise thanks to the availability of copious water in the sanctuary.

It is in October, coinciding with the onset of North East monsoon, that birds arrive here in large numbers. The flock of birds has been on the rise in the past few days, according to Forest Department officials.

The birds which arrive here include Little Grebe, Little Cormorant, Darter, Grey Pelican, Little Egret, Large Egret, Pond Heron, Grey Heron, Open Bill Stork, painted Stork, Woop Sandpiper etc.

The sanctuary spread over 454.11 hectares is free from noise pollution facilitating a large number of birds including migratory birds to come over here and stay here for a few months till February. Karaivetti has been a paradise for bird lovers.

The Forest Department has created new infrastructure in coordination with individuals and institutions in the district to encourage nature-lovers. It has taken steps for construction of watch towers and a telescope tower at a height of 50 feet to facilitate bird watchers get a glimpse of all birds spread over the sanctuary.

An interpretation centre has been constructed to give information about important birds visiting the sanctuary regularly. “The civil work has been completed while painting and other electrical work will be taken up in course of time,” sources told *The Hindu* on Monday.

What universal health assurance can mean for India



Water-logged areas infested with sewage, debris, uncleared garbage and rain-damaged medical facilities present myriad opportunities for infectious/vector-borne disease outbreaks.— File Photo

Over the last few weeks, India and the world watched in disbelief as Chennai, the fourth largest city in country, was crippled by unusually vicious monsoon rains. As the city and neighbouring areas were pounded with over 400 mm of continuous rain, many parts of the metropolis gave way to the deluge of water that inundated large swathes of land – causing life loss and vast damage to infrastructure.

In the aftermath, amidst fetid pools of receding water, city and state and society take stock of the devastation – more than 300 people dead, several hundred missing and thousands of homes destroyed by flood waters.

While poor urban planning, illegal construction and lack of storm water drainage are attributed in large part to the disaster, the huge health implications of this calamity are only just manifesting themselves. Water-logged areas infested with sewage, debris, uncleared garbage and rain-damaged medical facilities present myriad opportunities for infectious/vector-borne disease outbreaks, resurgence of chronic diseases and nutritional challenges, especially for vulnerable populations. It is significant that on December 12, several organisations across the world celebrated Universal Health Coverage (UHC) day – marking three years since the passing of a United Nations General Assembly resolution that committed all countries to achieving UHC. This goal is achieved when everybody receives the quality health services they need without suffering financial hardship.

The floods present a wake-up call to take stock of healthcare-delivery mechanisms at the Centre and States with their expanding cities – and its ability to deliver, particularly in disasters when its capability is truly tested. Universal Health Assurance (UHA) presents a first step to addressing these concerns. UHC can help build resilience against shocks be they in the form of epidemics, financial or natural disasters.

Fundamental components

Adopting UHC involves three fundamental components. The first step that underpins all others is to invest more public spending on health (from the current 1% to 2.5% of the GDP). Greater targeted financing for public health systems will help tackle inherent weaknesses around quality of care and access, reduce out-of-pocket spending on drugs and improve human resource and infrastructure shortfalls.

The second phase involves strengthening overall health system capacities that include: prioritising primary health as part of a cohesive care continuum;

integrating surveillance systems; and co-opting the strengths of a vibrant private health sector through prudent regulation.

The final phase involves restructuring governance and accountability mechanisms to better manage health delivery. The single biggest obstacle to achieving integrated national healthcare in the country has been the lack of convergence between various ministries dealing with education, health services and national vertical targeted programmes with non-health sector bureaus like water, sanitation and infrastructure.

A recent paper by Vikram Patel and colleagues in *The Lancet*, documenting India's progress in health, calls for prioritising services for groups across the whole population, based on their vulnerability and risk with gradual expansion of health coverage of high-priority services to everyone. This would involve integrating the country's various health insurance schemes and targeted vertical programmes into a national health assurance fund under a National Health (Assurance) Mission.

This requires establishing compulsory publicly-governed health financing systems with a strong role for the State in raising funds fairly, pooling resources and purchasing services to meet population needs. UHC requires a health financing strategy that replaces private voluntary financing (fees and private insurance) with compulsory public financing.

UHA is achievable for this country that has made tremendous progress in universal immunisation and establishing care continuum for Reproductive, Maternal, Child and Adolescent health. But for this to happen, the government needs show the political will to mandate health as a fundamental public good, central to India's developmental ambitions, on a par with education economic progress.

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It requires a financing strategy that replaces private voluntary financing with compulsory public financing

Prices of onion crash in Dindigul market

Wet and semi-perished onions were not sold even for Rs.5 a kg

With a spurt in arrival of shallots (small onions) from the major production centres of Uraiyur and Gujiliamparai, the wholesale onion market in Dindigul, one of the biggest markets in the State, witnessed a crash in prices of shallot varieties.

The sudden crash of prices in a span of 10 days has puzzled the traders and farmers. The prices of shallots that hovered between Rs.85 (top quality) and Rs.70 a kg (medium quality) last month came down to Rs.20 and Rs.10 a kg respectively on Monday.

The recent showers affected shallot production in major onion production centres in the State and hit regular arrivals from Theni, Andipatti, Dharapuram and Udumalpet.

While the rains damaged standing crop in many areas in the district, farmers managed to harvest the onions and brought them to market. Since they have a poor shelf life, fresh onions did not attract the traders.

Onions that were wet and semi-perished condition were not sold even for Rs.5 a kg. Though the yield was good in many places, the quality of onions was not upto desired levels, said onion traders.

The market received 4,000 bags on Monday, of which the arrival from domestic production centres, especially Ayyalur, Eriyodu and Gujiliamparai, was around 2,500 bags. Exports also did not pick up much owing to fresh arrivals of onions. Exporters preferred only matured shallots that were completely dry. Normally, fresh shallots from the field would be damp and the shelf-life short, they added. The market received 1,500 bags of old onions. “When we get a good yield, we face only a loss,” said S. Murugan, a farmer from Gujiliamparai.

Big onions

The prices of big onions imported from Egypt also crashed to Rs.18 a kg on Monday from Rs.52 a kg at the time of import. Each onion weighed around 250 to 400 grams. The traders send this variety to urban markets.

But the prices of big onion are stable at Rs.35 a kg in the wholesale market and Rs.45 a kg at farmers' market in Dindigul.

Coconut farmers to gain from recent heavy rains

Coconut farmers in Modakurichi block in the district where the crop has been raised on 3,200 hectares have a cause to heave a sigh of relief.

A stable groundwater position ensured by the recent spell of monsoon rains was expected to enhance productivity substantially, official sources said.

A year ago, the farmers were in an unenviable situation as the preceding years of drought-like conditions caused drying up of several hundreds of trees. The compensation for a withered tree ranged from a mere Rs. 500 to Rs. 1,000, based on the yield.

With comfortable water level in ponds and tanks, the crop would be robust for the next one year, official sources said, adding that the semi-dry trees would also spring back to life.

Water availability being a most important requirement of the coconut palm for the production of nuts, irrigation was necessary at places where groundwater was not sufficient.

Farmers said tallies were more tolerant of drought than hybrids and dwarfs. Those who had opted to raise hybrids, that yield more nuts in conditions of regular water supply, suffered more when the conditions remained dry for years at a stretch. Preceded by loss in yield, palms eventually succumbed to the drought.

Researches indicated that heavily bearing palms suffered more from drought than less productive palms. The productivity was bound to be more when the crops were irrigated in dry conditions.

Coconut palms were highly sensitive to water deficit conditions in terms of overall photosynthetic activity. Farmers could rest assured that water accrued from the monsoon rains would provide them substantial economic returns for the next one year, official sources said.

Progressive farmers in Modakurichi and Kodumudi block have installed drip irrigation system to optimise water utilisation

Egg price increases

Due to increase in demand, the wholesale price of egg increased by 12 paise to be fixed at Rs. 3.97 here on Monday.

Officials of the National Egg Coordination Committee (NECC), Namakkal Zone said that due to intense cold weather in North India, the production has dropped there.

Water level at Mettur

the Mettur Dam stood at 96.49 feet on Monday against its full level of 120 feet. The inflow was 3,576 cusecs and the discharge, 500 cusecs.

Coconut nursery planned at Seed Farm

To encourage people grow coconut even in their backyards and increase the overall productivity, the Department of Agriculture is all set to commence a coconut nursery on the State Seed Farm premises at Pongalur for production of hybrid varieties that suit local conditions.

The facility, planned at an outlay of Rs. 23 lakh from the government, will be set up on four acres of the 39.05 acre campus of State Seed Farm.

“This is the first initiative of the kind by the department in the district. In the first set, we plan to raise 30,000 seedlings of Tall X Dwarf variety of coconut. Quantity The quantity will then be gradually increased to a maximum of 45,000 seedlings in every set over the years,” Joint Director of Agriculture A. Mahendran told *The Hindu* .

He added that crossing to produce the hybrid varieties would be carried out at progressive farms, and the farmers would be paid attractive amounts for the nuts procured.

The nuts, thus, procured, will be raised first in the shade on the Seed Farm campus for three months and then under normal conditions for another three to four months before it is sold to farmers/growers.

“We will be distributing the seedlings at Rs. 50 a seedling against the market price of over Rs. 100,” said Mr. Mahendran.

The main benefits cited by the officials in raising the Tall X Dwarf variety vis-a-vis the traditional tall variety are that the hybrid variety would give better yield, and the height of the tree is less. It could be grown in backyards in the congested city environment too apart from raising it in general farms.

The coconut acreage in the district comes to 56,823 ha in the district.

This will go up once the nursery project takes off, said agriculture department officials.

Farmers producing bio-agents gaining attention



Biological agents production unit set up by a group of farmers at Kunnathur in Tirupur district.— Photo: R. VIMAL KUMAR

A group formed by 13 farmers at Kunnathur to promote value-addition to farm incomes is gaining attention as they are now successful commercial producers of bio-agents necessary for promotion of organic farming.

Unit

V. Sreenivasan (40) and 12 other progressive farmers, who were raising vegetables, turmeric, pulses and a few other crops on a total area of 150 acres in the area, came together to set up the unit for producing biological agents namely *Pseudomonas fluorescens* and *Trichoderma viride* with an initial capital of Rs. 5 lakh.

Of the expenditure, Rs. 1.25 lakh was obtained as subsidy extended by the Department of Agriculture from the corpus created under Rashtriya Krishi Vikas Yojana.

They are now producing nearly 20 tonnes of *Pseudomonas fluorescens* and *Trichoderma viride* a year.

Responsibility

But what made the farmers venture into the production of biological agents, which, according to Agriculture Department officials, is a lesser explored terrain at the village/farm level.

“At one point of time, we felt it as a responsibility to protect the earth from getting contaminated by the excessive use of chemicals to control/prevent insects, diseases and pests.

“For that, we thought that the bio-agents can be the best alternative and hence, the unit to produce high quality products,” Mr. Sreenivasan said.

K. Arasappan, Assistant Director of Agriculture, pointed out that pesticide residual toxicity, which was a big problem in vegetables and fruits, could be overcome by use of these types of bio-agents.

“It can be used for seed treatment and soil application,” he said.

As a recognition to the quality, the bio-agents produced by them are now being purchased by farmers from different parts of the State as well as by the Department of Agriculture.

DECCAN Chronicle

Centre yet to give shape to Tamil Nadu plan on climate change

State has planned a slew of climate change mitigation and adaptation projects.

Chennai: Though the Union Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEFCC) has approved the Tamil Nadu State Plan on Climate Change (TNSAPCC) at the National Steering Committee on Climate Change held in New Delhi on March 31, the Centre is yet to release funds to set the ball rolling.

Under the final draft report, the state has planned a slew of climate change mitigation and adaptation projects. The plan document was prepared by the state Department of Environment (DoE). The State has grand plans for seven key sectors, including sustainable agriculture; water resources; forests and biodiversity; coastal area management; energy efficiency, renewable energy and solar mission; sustainable habitat and knowledge management.

The document says the financing of the TNSAPCC can be directly taken from the existing programmes in the State and from national missions under NAPCC, programmes of the CSIR, ICAR, DST and from the budgetary provisions for climate change of bilateral and multilateral agencies such as the Department of International Development (DFID), Asian Development Bank (ADB) and the World Bank. Further, the State can also access finance from the adaptation fund, NABARD being the designated agency for managing this fund in India.

Jayalalithaa urges PM to sanction special housing scheme for 50,000 flood-hit families



Chennai: Tamil Nadu Chief Minister J Jayalalithaa on Monday urged Prime Minister Narendra Modi to sanction a special scheme for constructing 50,000 houses for the urban poor who need to be resettled at a total cost of 5,000 crore as part of restoration works in rain-hit areas.

Stating that the "poor and vulnerable" people, both in urban and rural areas, were worst affected, Jayalalithaa said the government has undertaken an "extensive exercise" of enumerating the affected families.

"Immediate ex-gratia payments are paid out of the Disaster Response Funds. However, this does not permanently rehabilitate them or enable reconstruction of their dwelling places," Jayalalithaa said in a letter to Modi.

Pointing out that 50,000 families living along the banks of Cooum river and Buckingham Canal were affected due to rains, she said her government would be able to accommodate 25,000 families in tenements already constructed by the Slum Clearance Board.

For the 25,000 families, particularly those living along the Buckingham Canal and another 25,000 families residing in vicinity of other waterbodies in suburbs, Jayalalithaa said government has prepared a project to construct 50,000 multi-storey tenements.

"The cost of construction per unit of 380 square foot, including the cost of providing other common amenities, is expected to be Rs 10 lakh per unit. The total cost of this massive special housing project will be Rs 5,000 crore," she said.

Jayalalithaa urged Modi to sanction a special scheme for the state government for construction of 50,000 houses for urban poor who need to be resettled at a total cost of Rs 5,000 crore.

She said the state government would bear the cost of land for constructing such houses.

"Affected families who are beneficiaries of the scheme would not be able to make contribution as per the norms of Housing for All programme.

"It is very essential that a special programme is approved for construction of houses with substantial enhanced Government of India contribution," she said.

For the houses of families, which suffered extensive damage but does not require relocation, Jayalalithaa asked Modi to make a special allocation of Rs 750 crore for 50,000 houses at the rate of Rs 1.50 lakh per house as Central grant.

The state government will add additional Rs one lakh per house to provide a grant of Rs 2.50 lakh per house for reconstruction of houses, she said.

About one lakh huts were partially or fully damaged due to the floods in Cuddalore, Thiruvallur, Kancheepuram and Tuticorin districts, Jayalalithaa said, adding, the government was planning to construct "pucca" houses in rural areas.

"I propose that the construction of pucca houses in rural areas can be funded under the Indira Awaas Yojana scheme with an enhanced unit cost of at least Rs 1.50 lakh per house as a special allocation," she said.

She appealed to Modi to instruct the Ministry of Housing and Urban Poverty Alleviation and Ministry of Rural Development "to expeditiously accord the additional special sanctions I have sought, so that the construction of houses could commence without any delay".



Gujarat govt likely to give bonus to cotton farmers

The Gujarat government is likely to announce bonus for cotton farmers on sale of the crop, in addition to the minimum support price of Rs 810 per 20 kg as announced by the NDA government at Centre around a month ago. Upset with the electoral drubbing in rural Gujarat, the move by the ruling [BJP](#) is considered as an attempt to win over the rural voters.

A senior government functionary said besides the Patidar reservation factor, support price for the cotton crop was one of the major reasons for BJP's loss to [Congress](#) in the rural areas. Therefore, the senior functionary added, the state government had initiated the exercise to work out a plan to give some financial aid to the cotton farmers.

Accordingly, a committee of the State Agriculture Department has held a series of meetings, followed by a meeting with the farmer leaders and agriculture produce market committees (APMCs) on the issue.

A decision to provide financial aid to cotton farmers will be officially taken as soon as CM Anandiben Patel clears it.

Cotton is one of the major cash crops in Gujarat and this year around 27 lakh hectare witnessed its sowing. The estimated production this year is likely 85-90 lakh bales, marginally less than the last year's 95 lakh bales of cotton harvest. The number of cotton growers in Gujarat this year could be around 13.5 lakh. Confirming the development, Agriculture Minister Babu Bokhiria said, "Yes, our committee's meeting has already taken place. Also, meetings with farmer leaders and APMCs have been held on the issue. The decision will be taken in a day or two after the Chief Minister considers and clears the views expressed in the meetings (of stake holders)."

"We are considering the modality of giving bonus (to cotton farmers) — whether to give it on the basis of total sowing or total production," he added. He, however, denied that the move was because of the unrest among farmers. "We were to give this increase (in support price) but, could not do that because of the elections," he said.

THE HINDU BusinessLine

Vegoil imports up 13% in Nov as prices fall on excess supply



Vegetable oil imports increased 13 per cent in November to 13.42 lakh tonnes (lt) against 11.89 lt logged in the same period last year, largely due to excess supply in the international market dragging down price.

The exporting countries Indonesia and Malaysia boosted their export by allowing duty-free exports to reduce their inventory. India imported 13.37 lt of edible oil and 4,499 tonnes of non-edible oil.

Domestic edible oil industry and farming communities are hit by the current upward trend in edible oil imports, which has increased 24 per cent to 14.4 mt between November 2014 and October 2015. It is a well-known fact that globally

the prices of edible oil are historically low since 2008 and had affected the domestic industry hard, said BV Mehta, Secretary, Solvent Extractors' Association.

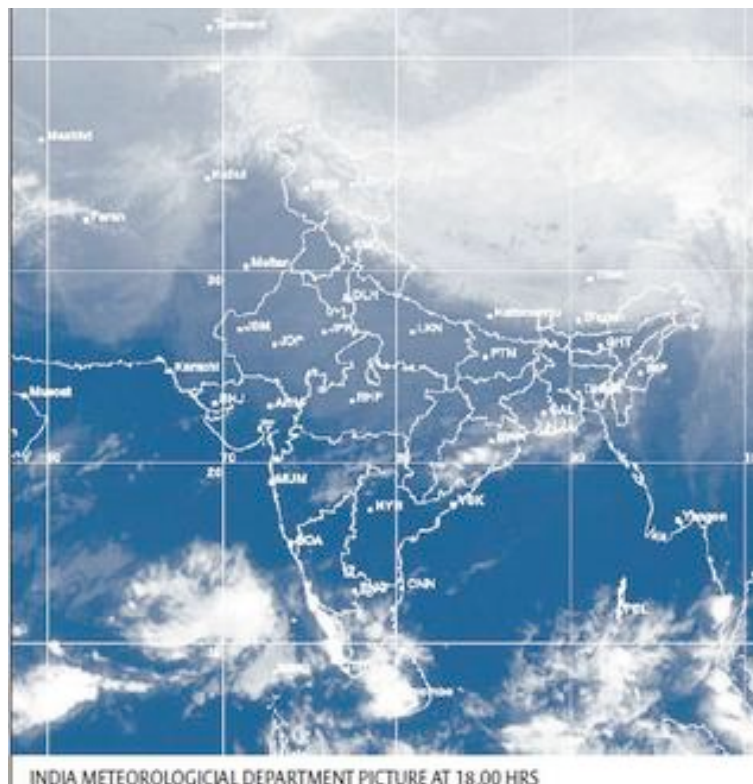
The price difference between the imported and domestically produced palmolein is about ₹3,000 a tonne. SEA has made a representation with the Centre to revise the duty structure of crude and refined oil to at least 15 per cent by raising import duty on refined oil from 20 per cent to 27.5 per cent.

This action will also ensure that farmers get remunerative price for their produce in ensuing rabi season and will help the domestic refiners to improve capacity utilisation from 45-50 per cent to 65-70 per cent, it said.

As of November 1, edible oil inventory has hit a record high. Stock at various ports is estimated at 10.20 lt – CPO of 5 lt, refined palmolein 1.85 lt, degummed soyabean oil 1.55 lt, crude sunflower oil 1.30 lt and 50,000 tonnes of rapeseed and another 14.10 lt is in the pipeline.

Total stock at ports and in pipelines increased to 24.30 lt in November from 23.70 lt in the same period last year. India's monthly requirement is about 16 lt.

Cold wave grips North-West, dense fog envelops East



Cold wave conditions have arrived in North-West India as west Rajasthan, Haryana and Chandigarh came to grips with the winter chill only by the middle of December, later than usual.

This also marks the beginning of the crucial one-month period when occurrence of fog to dense fog conditions hits vehicular, train and air traffic over North, North-West and East India.

Western disturbance

The cold spells and the fog episodes alternate with the arrival and departure of western disturbances, which are the major weather-making systems during winter in the region.

Overall, they bring the cold Arctic air into play over the region to herald winter, but also pick up moisture along the way, and closest from the North-East Arabian Sea.

The moisture gets converted in the hills of the North-West India as snow and heavy rain while over the plain it falls as thundershowers, which aids the standing crop.

The moisture warms up the atmosphere thanks to the process of convection (cloud-building), causing minimum temperatures (night temperatures) to perk up. In this manner, western disturbances also help break the biting cold events.

Dense fog

An India Met Department update on Monday said that dense fog has been observed during the morning hours over Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Sub-Himalayan West Bengal and the entire North-East India.

This represents a phase in which a passing western disturbance may have left North-West India to the East. As if on cue, minimum temperatures fell below normal by 2 degree Celsius to 5 degree Celsius at most places over Haryana, Delhi, Chandigarh and east Rajasthan and at a few places over Saurashtra and Kutch, Jammu and Kashmir, Himachal Pradesh, and Gujarat.

A feeble western disturbance is waiting to cross over into North-West India in the next few days which may help bring up the night temperatures over the North-West.

Cold to persist

Forecast valid for Tuesday said that cold wave conditions would prevail over Punjab, Haryana, Chandigarh, Delhi, and East Rajasthan.

Dense fog would continue to hang over Bihar, West Bengal, Sikkim, Assam, Meghalaya, Nagaland, Manipur, Mizoram and Tripura.

The weather over South India, especially over Tamil Nadu that witnessed the North-East monsoon reach a peak during late November and early December, has more or settled.

Only isolated rain events in hills have been reported during the 24 hours ending on Monday morning.

Arrivals dip at Kochi tea auctions

Kochi tea auctions continue to witness low arrivals for the last few consecutive weeks, with fluctuations in prices of several varieties.

There was a better demand for CTC dusts in sale no 50 and the quantity on offer was 9,50,000 kg. The market for teas which came under the selection of AVT was steady to firm and sometimes dearer, the auctioneers Forbes, Ewart & Figgis said. The quantity on offer in orthodox grades was low at 12,000 kg. In Cochin CTC dust quotation, good varieties quoted ₹106-157, mediums fetched ₹79-122 and plain grades stood at ₹66-77.

However, there was a good demand in leaf varieties with Nilgiri brokens and Fannings in orthodox grades remained steady to firm. The quantity on offer was 170,500 kg. There was only a fair demand in CTC leaf market with only 61,500 kg was on offer.

Export buying holds cardamom steady

Cardamom prices maintained a nearly steady trend last week on matching demand and supply despite heavy arrivals at auctions held in Kerala and Tamil Nadu.

Arrivals were at around 820 tonnes against 964 tonnes the previous week. According to the trade, export buying has aided in keeping the prices from falling further, trade sources in Bodinayakannur said. Exporters were active, as the prices were ruling at lower levels, and they have bought an estimated 120 tonnes. The individual auction average last week was vacillating between ₹590 and ₹630 a kg.

At the Cardamom Planters' Association (CPA) auction in Bodi today arrivals increased to 63.6 tonnes from 45.3 tonnes the previous Monday and of this 60.7 tonnes were sold. The auction average remained steady at ₹570 a kg.

Total arrivals during the season up to December 12 were at around 14,250 tonnes and sales were at 13,840 tonnes. The individual auction average as on December 12 was at ₹629/kg. Good colour 8mm bold green was fetching ₹940-950.

Prices of other graded varieties (₹/kg): 8mm bold good green colour 850-900; 7-8 mm 720-740; 6-7 mm 620-630; below 6 mm: 585-590.

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THE TIMES OF INDIA

Water release according to rules, says chief secretary

CHENNAI: In the wake of widespread criticism that the worst-ever deluge of Chennai was caused by the state government's poor management of water release from Chembarambakkam reservoir, state chief secretary K Gnanadesikan has said release of water was regulated according to the flood compendium rules and keeping in mind the forecast of "isolated very heavy rain".

In meteorological parlance, "very heavy rain" means 12.4cm to 24.4cm, but Chennai and nearby districts were pounded by almost twice that, he said in a statement on Sunday. The reservoir received about 2.13 thousand million cubic feet of water in 24 hours (ending at noon on December 2) - 60% of reservoir's capacity. Hence, advanced lowering of reservoir level would have made little difference, he said.

On December 9, TOI was the first to say that officials could have anticipated the heavy rain and released water proactively. Gnanadesikan disputed reports that NASA had put out a 50cm forecast, saying "NASA has said they do not predict rainfall."

But the chief secretary did not explain why the government ignored BBC's weather warning of 50cm rainfall. Also, the state went into December with a forecast of very heavy rainfall after passing through the wettest-ever November in 100 years. Yet officials chose to go by the book and increased water release only on December 1, after incessant rains the previous night.

'Free water bodies of encroachments'

CHENNAI: Union urban development minister M Venkaiah Naidu on Sunday asked all state governments to take immediate action against encroachments on water bodies. "We have to learn lessons from the floods in Chennai. I feel the time has come to take it on a war-footing and remove these encroachments, both public and private," he told reporters, after meeting chief minister J Jayalithaa at the secretariat on Sunday.

After a 40-minute meeting with the chief minister, other ministers and senior officials, Naidu told reporters that the Centre was willing to "extend all support required in this hour of crisis" to the state.

Naidu said he had discussed the issue of encroachments on the Cooum and Buckingham Canal in Chennai with the chief minister. He added that this was not an issue only in Tamil Nadu, it was happening in Andhra Pradesh and other states as well.

"The reservoirs are shrinking, lakes are shrinking, rivers are shrinking," he said. To avoid future tragedies like the devastation caused by the recent floods in Chennai, water bodies have to be expanded, reservoirs and bunds should be strengthened, he said. Efforts should be made to maintain a 'green belt' of anywhere between 5 m and 30 m on riverbanks, to safeguard against flooding, he said.

On Sunday, Naidu visited flood-hit areas like Tambaram, Velachery, Ekkaduthangal and Kotturpuram here, and interacted with residents.

According to an official release, the chief minister asked the urban development ministry to provide a special package of 4,500 crore to take up restoration work in urban local bodies severely affected due to the recent rains.

Jayalalithaa drew his attention on the extensive damage caused to roads, drinking water, sewerage and stormwater drainage systems in flood-affected urban local bodies, the release said.

"The urban local bodies, including Chennai Corporation would require substantial assistance for restoration. Preliminary estimates of the requirement exceed 4,500 crore," Jayalalithaa was quoted as saying in the release.

Since the local bodies "cannot rely on their own source of tax revenue" to take up restoration work, she urged Naidu to grant the special package.

Jayalalithaa pointed out that the slum dwellers living along the Adyar, Cooum and Buckingham Canal lost their homes and belongings in the floods, and are housed in relief centres. She informed Naidu about a special project to construct alternative housing for 50,000 families who lost their houses, requiring funding of Rs 5,000 crore.

The chief minister also requested Naidu for speedy approval of the Rs 3,770 crore Metrorail Phase-I project running from Washermanpet to Thiruvottiyur. In his response, the union minister said that the project was approved by the ministry of urban development and has been sent to the public investment board in the finance ministry for clearance, according to the release.