

Pulses yield helps TN win Krishi Karman Award



Pulses coverage and production increased in the State in 2013-14 following a series of initiatives taken by the State Government.

That Tamil Nadu has bagged the Krishi Karman Award for 2013-2014 from the Central Government for increased food production is not news anymore.

But what is, is the technological, varietal interventions from the Tamil Nadu Agricultural University (TNAU) and the support it gave to the Agriculture Department to increase the cultivable area under pulses and yield in the State.

The University Vice-Chancellor K. Ramasamy says the University introduced a new variety of red gram (tur dal) - Co.R.G. 7 around five years ago - and asked farmers to follow transplantation system just as they did for paddy. In areas like Dharmapuri and Krishnagiri, it asked farmers to go in for drip irrigation, fertigation. It gave farmers benefit. The University also promoted the

C 06 variety black gram (urad dal) that saw quick takers in farmers and also traders as the quality saw better tasting *idli* and *vada*, he adds.

Aside from newer varieties, which brought down the crop cycle from 180 days to 60 days – 120 days depending on the pulse cultivated, the University joined hands with farmers to multiply pulses seeds through participatory approach, encouraged taking up system of pulse intensification cultivation, recommended the right foliar nutrition and suggested adopting integrated pest management techniques, says J.R. Kannan Babu, Professor and Head, Department of Pulses, TNAU.

The techniques meant that the farmers need not employ workers three or four times to harvest pulses. They could employ the workers once as the new varieties promoted were synchronised maturing ones. This minimised the farmers' labour cost.

Mr. Babu says one more reason for farmers taking up pulses cultivation in good number was the adaptability of the new varieties – the farmers could cultivate it round the year and also as an intercrop.

Along with introducing new varieties, the TNAU also asked farmers to use herbicides, foliar nutrition (to increase flowering content) and 'TNAU Pulse Wonder', a spray to boost production. These helped increase the yield.

The TNAU reports suggest that the average pulses yield went up from 223 kg an acre in 2011-12 to 294 kg an acre in 2014-15. (The figure for 2014-15 includes advance estimates). And, the area from 6.68 lakh hectare in 2011-12 to over nine lakh ha this year.

Red gram farmer from Coimbatore B. Ranganathan says that the yield from Co.R.G. 7 is at least three quintals more an acre than the old ADT 5 variety. It dips marginally when cultivated in December, though.

Grain stocks

Buffer limits breached

India is holding excess foodgrains stocks worth nearly Rs. 50,000 crore, over and above the stipulated buffer limits. At close to 49 million tonnes, the stocks are more than twice the norm, the former chairman of the Commission for Agricultural Costs and Prices (CACAP), Ashok Gulati, has said.

From the archives (dated January 19, 1965)

Industrial output

Industrial production in India has suffered further setback, and the rate of growth has declined by 2.4 per cent, from 8.6 per cent to 6.2 per cent, according to official figures available for the first half of 1964-65. The output was particularly low from March to June last year when the increase was only 4.9 per cent — the lowest in the last two-and-a-half years. An analysis of the official data shows that the decline in the rate of industrial output has been mainly due to the fall in the production of coal, iron ore, pig iron, steel ingots, sewing machines, electric fans, ammonium sulphate, woollen and worsted fabrics, and vanaspati.

Modern farm methods

Steps to encourage farmers to take to modern methods of agriculture for better production were discussed by the Agricultural Production Board at its twelfth meeting in New Delhi on January 16. Mr. C. Subramaniam, Union Food Minister, presided. The Board considered the part played by co-operative institutions in agriculture and decided that a few pilot projects might be undertaken to enable well-managed co-operatives to have technical staff attached to them so that credit promotion and distribution of agricultural requisites such as improved seeds, fertilizers and pesticides could be handled simultaneously.

Akademi award

The Executive Board of the Sahitya Akademi which met in New Delhi on January 17 under the Chairmanship of President Radhakrishnan, selected thirteen books for the Akademi Award 1964. The selection was made on the basis of the recommendations of the Sahitya Akademi's advisers in the languages concerned, in accordance with the procedure. The award 1964 relates to books first published during the preceding three years (Jan.1, 1961 to Dec.31, 1963).

India's excess grain stocks worth Rs. 50,000 crore: expert



Cutting them is crucial for reducing inflation, fiscal deficit

India is holding excess foodgrain stocks worth nearly Rs. 50,000 crore, over and above the stipulated buffer limits, according to experts. At close to 49 million tonnes, the stocks are more than twice the norm, former chairman of the Commission for Agricultural Costs and Prices (CACP) Ashok Gulati told *The Hindu*.

The Cabinet Committee on Economic Affairs (CCEA) headed by Prime Minister Narendra Modi on Friday reduced the norm for January 1 to 21.41 million tonnes from 25 million tonnes with the aim of better management of food reserves in the country. Cutting excess stocks is crucial for reducing both inflation in foodgrain prices and the Centre's fiscal deficit.

Mr. Gulati said the Modi government had taken a decision four months ago to reduce the excess holdings. However, it was able to offload less than 2 million tonnes from the 15 million tonnes (10 million tonnes wheat and 5 million tonnes rice) to be liquidated, said Mr. Gulati.

“What is the point of announcing new norms if you are sitting over a heap of foodgrain that is well above the old limits... there is no rationality in India’s food stock holdings,” Mr. Gulati said adding that the excess reserves are worth Rs. 50,000 crore.

Ahead of recommending the new buffer stocks norms to the CCEA, the Food Ministry had consulted experts from various fields, including Mr. Gulati.

Besides revising the buffer norms, the CCEA also decided to offload excess stocks through open market sales or exports. An inter-ministerial group, comprising the Food Secretary, Consumer Affairs Secretary and Revenue Secretary, will work out the strategy for offloading the excess stocks to contain inflation and reduce storage costs.

The revised buffer norm for April 1 is 21.04 million tonnes of wheat and rice as against the present 21.2 million tonnes. For July 1, it is 41.12 million tonnes as against 31.9 million tonnes. On October 1, the stock should be 30.77 million tonnes as against 21.2 million tonnes and on Jan. 1, it should be 21.41 million tonnes as against 25 million tonnes.

The buffer will include five million tonnes of strategic reserves of wheat and rice. The proposal is to upgrade the quarterly buffer requirement to bring it in line with the distribution needs under the National Food Security Act.

As much as 61.4 million tonnes of foodgrain is required a year for welfare schemes — Antyodaya Anna Yojana and for the provision of 5 kg to each member of a priority household under the National Food Security Act.

Norms for buffer stocks had not been revised since 2002, while the stocking of strategic reserves for calamities and so on has been done since 2005.

Free medical treatment for cattle

With the aim of boosting Gujarat's cattle rearing sector, Chief Minister Anandi Patel on Sunday launched a scheme under which the government will provide free medical treatment for cattle.

"We will bear all expanses related to treatment, including expenses for surgery as well medicines," Ms. Patel said while launching the scheme in Gandhinagar.

She was inaugurating a seminar 'One Health', organised by the Gujarat Veterinary Council. The Chief Minister dedicated 17 mobile diagnosis laboratories for the purpose. These mobile vans would be given to 17 different districts and offer diagnosis at the doorstep of cattle-rearer, said an official press release.

Patel was accompanied by state Agriculture Minister Babu Bokhiria and Union Minister of State for Agriculture Mohan Kundariya among others.

Kundariya lauded the contribution of veterinary doctors, saying that they deserved more respect than other doctors. "Veterinary doctors not only serve cattle, but also the cattle-rearer. Due to the efforts of Gujarat government as well as the Centre, per capita milk production has risen from mere 82 grams in 1951 to almost 375 grams today," he said. — PTI

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Reducing them is crucial for reducing inflation, fiscal deficit



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Wild boars run amok destroying standing crop in several villages of Shahapur taluk

Standing crop, particularly jowar, were destroyed by wild boars which ran amok in agriculture fields at Babalad, Beernal, Hulkal, Gursanagi, Kurkundi, Ullesugur, Malahalli and surrounding villages of Shahapur taluk in Yadgir district in the past couple of days.

Most of the jowar plants were uprooted by the wild boars. Farmers, who had invested heavily in the crop, are in distress, as they said that they would not be in a position to recover even 10 per cent of the yield from the damaged crop.

Hopes dashed

Eshwar, a farmer from Babalad village, whose jowar crop in his five acres of land was almost damaged due to the raid by the wild boars, said that he expected a good yield this time.

But, the wild boars damaged his crop at a crucial stage. He said that he would suffer heavy loss if compensation for crop damage was not paid at the earliest. At present, jowar crop has entered the grain-filling stage from the flowering stage.

A remedy

However, the only remedy to protect the crop is to put up electric fencing around farmland, which was expensive. And, it is not easy to get permission from the Forest Department under the norms of the existing forest laws.

When contacted, S.P. Raju, District Forest Officer, told *The Hindu* over phone that farmers, whose crop were damaged in the wild boar attack, should approach the forest range officers with details. Based on the information provided by the farmers, forest officials would visit the spot and submit detailed reports after analysing the loss incurred. Thereafter, the report would be sent to the government recommending compensation.

Truly a trailblazer



Bantu Atreya in his gerbera farm at Govindpet of Armoor mandal.– Photo: K.V. Ramana

Born in a middle class agricultural family in Govindpet village of Armoor mandal, this 26-year-old software engineer, Bantu Atreya, could not continue in his profession in Melbourne, Australia though it was fetching him a six-digit salary per month. He had set his heart on coming back to his native village to pursue agriculture using modern methods.

"Agriculture is dearest to my heart. I want to show that it's a profitable and noble profession. There is no rule that an educated person should not do farming. I am comfortable with my occupation and have no regrets," says Mr. Atreya, who did his MS in Computer Science Engineering in Melbourne in 2011 after completing B.Tech in Raja Rajendra College of Engineering, Hyderabad. Thereupon, he settled as a software and computer science engineer in Australia and continued for two years. However, he was not too happy as he felt that there was something missing. Having decided to take up agriculture on his 19 acres of land owned by his family, he came back lock, stock and barrel in 2013.

When he shared his idea with his parents – Rajanna and Anjavva – and his two elder brothers, who are also software engineers, he got an affirmative 'no' to his plan. In spite of initial non-cooperation in the family, he wanted to go ahead with his plan and began working towards the same. His friends, peer group and youth in the village were taken aback when he started going to his farm. .

Being educated, he found it easy to learn modern methods in farming and got closer access to the firms providing farm technology and various supporting schemes available through the government. He experimentally began gerbera (a cut flower used in decoration) cultivation on a half-acre plot of land in a poly house also known as greenhouse, besides sowing maize, soyabean, sorghum and paddy in the rest of the land.

His parents slowly relented and now are extending support to his idea. "I am happy with the crop as I have cut the flowers twice. Eight varieties of flower

saplings were transplanted and they have grown well. I want to do integrated farming with poultry, dairy and vegetable cultivation in future," he says.

Briefly

AGRICULTURAL FAIR

TOMORROW

The Department of Agriculture will organise district krishi utsava and jalanayana mela (farm and watershed festival) at Moodbidri on January 20. Minister in charge of Dakshina Kannada B. Ramanath Rai will inaugurate it at the Padmavathi Kalyana Mandira. There will be sessions on organic farming, modern methods of paddy cultivation and mechanised paddy farming. There will also be interaction with farmers. Harish Shenoy, agriculture scientist, Krishi Vignana Kendra, Mangaluru; Prabhakara Mayya, a progressive farmer of Ujire; and Shivashnakar H.D., Deputy Agriculture Director, Fertiliser Quality Control Laboratory, Belthangady, will be the resource persons, a release said.

CALL TO REDUCE

FOOD PRICES

Democratic Youth Federation of India has urged the district administration to take steps to urge hotels in the city to reduce prices of food. Its district unit secretary Santhosh Bajal said in a release that prices of commercial cooking gas cylinders, rice, vegetables and foodgrains have come down drastically owing to reduction in inflation. Notwithstanding it, hotels had not reduced the

prices of their items. He said that high prices have affected students, drivers, daily wagers and others who depended on hotel food.

ROMILA THAPAR TO DELIVER LECTURE

Eminent Historian and distinguished author Romila Thapar will deliver late B.V. Kakkilaya inspired oration on Indian society and secularism at the University College here on January 21 at 4.30 p.m. Former professor of History of Mangaluru University B. Surendra Rao will preside over it. Ms. Thapar is a professor Emerita at Jawaharlal Nehru University. She is also Honorary Fellow of Lady Margaret Hall, Oxford, a release said.

Groundnut price to remain stable during harvest time

The Agro Market Intelligence and Business Promotion Centre (AMI&BPC) of the Department of Agricultural Marketing and Agri Business has indicated that the price of groundnut would remain stable during the 'thaipattam' harvest season.

In a price advisory, the centre said farmers could get a price of Rs. 40 to Rs. 42 a kg of groundnut pod at Sevur Regulated Market in Tirupur district and Rs. 45 to Rs. 47 a kg at Tindivanam Regulated Market during April - May 2015. The relatively higher price for pod in Tindivanam market is mainly due to the higher number of traders and low arrivals compared to the Sevur regulated market.

The price advisory was based on market surveys and econometric analysis of the prices of groundnut pod that prevailed in Sevur and Tindivanam Regulated Markets over the past couple of decades conducted by the AMI & BPC

functioning at the Centre for Agricultural and Rural Development Studies (CARDS), Tamil Nadu Agricultural University.

The price advisory said during 2013-14, India stood second in terms of production (9.47 million tonnes) and first in area under the crop with 5.25 million hectares. The Crop Forecast Coordination Centre (CFCC), Union Ministry of Agriculture and Co-operation, has estimated groundnut production for the kharif 2014-15 would be 50.24 lakh tones in the major crop-growing states of Gujarat, Andhra Pradesh, Rajasthan, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra, which account for close to 90 per cent of the production. This was lower by 55.69 lakh tonnes to the 2013-14 kharif season. Groundnut exports during 2013-14 stood at 5.10 lakh tonnes. In 2014-15 it was expected to be around six lakh tonnes.

In Tamil Nadu, groundnut was cultivated on 3.39 lakh hectares of land and the State produced 7.85 lakh tonnes with an average yield of 2,751 kg a hectare during 2012-13. The major groundnut-producing districts are Tiruvannamalai, Villupuram, Vellore, Kanchipuram, Thiruvallur, Cuddalore, Namakkal, Krishnagiri, Salem, and Dharmapuri. In most of these districts, groundnut is sown during July to August (Adipattam) and January to February (Thaipattam). In Thaipattam, it is grown under irrigated conditions. Thaipattam is one of the major sowing seasons for groundnut in Tamil Nadu.

Small tea growers seek action against factories

The third district conference of the Malai Maavatta Small Farmers Welfare Association held at Kotagiri on Sunday resolved to urge the government to

cancel the permits of Bought Leaf Tea Factories which were not offering fair prices for the produce of the small tea growers.

Pointing out that despite an order of the Madras High Court and recommendations of the district price monitoring committee, the factories were not giving remunerative prices. The Conference wanted the government to nationalise the factories.

By another resolution the Conference wanted the government to re-open closed Industrial Cooperative (INDCO) tea factories and re-structure their management to facilitate a bigger role for the farmers.

The loans availed by farmers to take up floriculture as an alternative to tea should be waived.

Expressing concern over the rapidly escalating man-wild animal conflict, the conference urged the government to improve the habitats in order to prevent wild animals from straying into human habitations.

Farmers should be permitted to use guns with rubber bullets to keep wild animals away from their farms. Association President Thumbur I.Bhojan presided.

Decks cleared for Bargur cattle research station

The Tamil Nadu Veterinary and Animal Sciences University has initiated steps to establish a research centre for Bargur breed of cattle in the district.

The University is close to finalising the site for the research station mandated with the task of propagating population of the indigenous breed on Bargur hills, according to official sources.

Long-felt need

The Animal Husbandry Ministry's sanction signifies fulfilment of a long-felt need of the farmers who are mostly Kannada-speaking Lingayat community people.

The rearers, who used to maintain large herds that grazed in forest land, were spared of the fodder cost. But now they have scaled down the numbers due to restrictions imposed by the Forest Department.

With the research station in place, the prospect for farmers taking up cattle-rearing as a major income-generation activity could be revived, according to E.N. Sivasenapathy, president of Bargur Hill Cattle Breeders' Association.

For the first time last year, the Animal Husbandry Department conducted an exhibition for the Bargur breed at Thurasanampalayam on the hills.

Farmers say the research station will be helpful in enhancing purity of the breed that has a high resistance capacity to diseases. There is a niche market for ghee, butter and other products made of milk of native breed cows. The products are sold for a premium, Mr. Sivasenapathi said.

Also, Bargur cattle, despite their small size, are sturdy and are capable of hauling heavy loads with ease, and small-scale farmers mainly depend on this

breed to plough fields. The hooves of this breed are naturally strong and do not require horseshoes.

This breed is suited to work in uneven hilly terrains. The animals are known for their speed and endurance in trotting.

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ISB study blames MSP for food inflation

The increasing minimum support prices for wheat and rice over the years have led to rising food inflation, burgeoning procurement and buffer stocks as also growing food subsidy bill, a study has found.

This was found by a study conducted by the faculty at the Indian School of Business (ISB) here. It looked at the food policy and macro-economic trends in relation to procurement and other issues such as food inflation from 2005 to 2012. It found that the rising food inflation also contributed to increase in overall inflation.

Prof. Krishnamurthy Subramanian, faculty in Finance at ISB, said in case the production was high, the prices might be lower than the MSP. So, to bring parity between the open market price and MSP, the government would have to procure more than what needs to be supplied through PDS. An increase by one rupee per quintal in MSP increases the quantity to be stored 'inefficiently' by 2.26 lakh quintals for wheat and 3.48 lakh quintals for rice. Explaining how rising MSP was pushing up food inflation, Prof. Krishnamurthy said if MSP was lower than the open market price, then the government would not have to intervene. In case the production was higher and the MSP was higher than the open market price, the government would have to intervene and ensure higher procurement, which in turn would push up food inflation.' He said this would make farmers to over-invest in MSP-supported crops while ignoring others. While the demand for protein-rich foods has been increasing, the supply was not in tune with the demand and this mismatch was pushing up the prices of non-MSP supported crops. This in turn was contributing to food price inflation and overall inflation. The study suggested cash transfers to farmers as potential solution. The cash to be given to the farmer should be the difference between wholesale market price and MSP.

Prof. Subramanian said if the open market price was Rs.500 a quintal and the MSP was fixed at Rs.600, then the farmer could sell it in the open market and the government could provide the gap of Rs.100. Instead of the government procuring at the MSP rate, through cash transfer the revenue outgo for government would be much less. This in turn would reduce MSP impact on food inflation.



Mixed response to frost among planters

The severe frost being experienced in various parts of the district for the past few days has evoked mixed reactions among the tea planting community.

Speaking to *The Hindu* many of the small tea growers pointed out that already they have been subjected to considerable hardship on account of their raw tea leaves fetching unremunerative prices. The reduction in yield will be akin to adding insult to injury.

The president, Nilgiris District Small Tea Growers Association Ramesh Bhojarajan said that though frost affected the yield there was also a beneficial side to such weather. The scorched tea leaves will give way to fresh young ones when Spring dawns. Meanwhile the Joint Director of Horticulture N. Mani said that apart from traditionally frost-prone areas some new areas have been affected by the current spell of frost. He added that a survey would be undertaken soon.

Integrated management of safflower aphid

Out of a dozen insect pests, the safflower aphid causes 30 to 80 per cent yield loss based upon weather conditions. Though safflower aphid causes

economic damage to the crop, majority of growers seldom use control measures.

The adult aphid is black and shining. With the help of its syringe like proboscis, both nymphs and adults suck the cell sap due to which the plant growth is stunted.

Different seasons

In case of severe attack, the plants start showing drying symptoms from lower leaves progressing towards the top. In Karnataka, the aphid first appears during first week of November and reaches a peak between end of December and end of January and disappears by the end of March.

In Maharashtra it starts at the end of October and reaches peak by first week of January. However, in Delhi the aphid made its appearance in February and peaked during mid March.

Management strategies

— Take up plant protection measures soon after appearance of the aphid.

—Early sowing escapes the peak pest incidence. In Karnataka, October and November sown crop had maximum infestation while, the September sown crop experienced less damage. In Maharashtra, mid September was better for sowing to minimise aphid damage.

— Application of balanced fertilizer is also one of the components in aphid management.

— Higher the nitrogenous fertilizer, more will be the aphid infestation and vice-versa.

—Safflower, intercropped with sorghum, coriander and wheat reduces the pest population. Safflower with coriander not only reduces the aphid population on safflower, but increases the predatory population.

Chemical insecticides

Chemical insecticides are one of the inevitable components in the integrated pest management. Insecticides like thiamethoxam at 0.2gm/l, acetamiprid followed by imidacloprid were found more effective and economical. Among several seed dressers, carbosulfan 25 DS at 20 gm/kg of seed proved effective.

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MCX planning to launch contracts in agri-commodities :

NEW DELHI: Country's largest commodity exchange MCX is planning to launch contracts in new agri commodities by end of this financial year, a company's top official said.

MCX, which predominantly deals in metals and other non-agri commodities, at present offers future contracts in six agri-commodities-- crude palm oil, kapasia khalli, kapas, cotton, mentha oil and cardamom.

"We are exploring the option of launching future contracts in some more agri-commodities and we are likely to start contracts in at least one new agri-commodity by end of current fiscal," MCX Joint Managing Director P K Singhal told PTI.

Singhal also said that turnover of commodity exchanges including MCX is likely to increase in coming days.



After petrol and diesel, govt may deregulate urea

January 19, 2015 2:48 am

After petrol and diesel, the Narendra Modi government is looking next to deregulate urea. In the works is a three-year plan to decontrol the maximum retail price (MRP) of this fertiliser — currently fixed at Rs 5,360 a tonne or Rs 268 per 50-kg bag — alongside permitting duty-free imports sans any canalisation or restrictions, and credit the subsidy directly into the bank accounts of farmers.

Urea imports now attract 5 per cent customs duty and can be undertaken only through the state-owned MMTC, STC and Indian Potash Ltd.

"In three years, we will have full digitisation of land records and soil health cards for every farmer, apart from bank accounts under the Jan Dhan Yojana seeded with unique Aadhaar numbers. That would set the stage for direct

subsidy transfer along with removal of all MRP and import controls," highly placed officials told The Indian Express.

The proposed deregulation plan may be announced in the coming Union budget for 2015-16. "Simultaneously, we could also raise the MRP by, say, 20 per cent annually for the next three years. This can be in two instalments of 10 per cent each before the kharif and rabi season of every year, so that the MRP is closer to Rs 9,500 a tonne (Rs 475 per bag) even before decontrol happens," an official said.

Since April 1, 2010, when a nutrient-based subsidy (NBS) regime was introduced, the prices of all non-urea fertilisers — which are already decontrolled — have shot up significantly.

For instance, the MRP of di-ammonium phosphate has increased from just Rs 9,350 to around Rs 23,000 a tonne, while similarly showing a rise from Rs 4,455 to Rs 16,650 for muriate of potash and from Rs 7,197 to Rs 21,450 for the popular 10:26:26 NPK complex fertiliser.

In contrast, the Centre has raised the MRP of urea only marginally, from Rs 4,830 to Rs 5,360 a tonne. Urea has been kept out of the NBS, under which firms are paid a fixed subsidy for every tonne of fertiliser based on nutrient (nitrogen, phosphorus or potash) content even while being free to set MRPs.

Urea constitutes roughly 55 per cent of India's total fertiliser consumption, making its decontrol all the more difficult politically. Out of the Centre's fertiliser subsidy of Rs 72,970.30 crore budgeted for 2014-15, Rs 48,300 crore is on account of urea.

But duty-free imports and de-canalisation can also hurt domestic manufacturers. There are at present 30 plants producing nearly 23 million tonnes (mt) out of the country's annual urea consumption of 30 mt. Their average production cost works out to about Rs 18,000 per tonne, as against an average landed price of \$300 a tonne (Rs 18,600) for imported urea.

"The production costs for individual units range from Rs 11,000 to as high as Rs 41,000 a tonne. The ones with high costs will obviously shut down if the sector is thrown open to competition. We want to avoid that to the extent possible," the officials noted.

Jaitley for long-term agri investment to meet food demand -

January 17, 2015 2:16 am

Finance minister Arun Jaitley on Friday outlined plans to improve supply chain for agricultural commodities including establishing a National Common Market and reforms in the APMC Act.

"Our aim is to move towards National Common Market for agricultural commodities and improve the supply chain. With the cooperation of states, we propose to move ahead on goods and services tax and APMC reforms," he said at a pre-Budget with representatives of agriculture groups.

The minister further noted that the government has taken a number of decisions in last few months to make the agriculture sector more vibrant including setting-up of 'Warehouse Infrastructure Fund' and 'Long Term Rural Credit Fund', of about Rs 5,000 crore each; and setting-up of special fund of Rs 2,000 crore under NABARD, which was announced in the Union Budget

for 2014-15 to provide affordable credit to agro-processing units, setting-up of food parks and cold chain projects.

Along with finance ministry officials, the meeting was also attended by Crispino Lobo, managing trustee, WOTR, Dinesh, chief executive, National Cooperative Union of India, Vijayan Rajes, president, United Planters Association of South India, Gulshan John, chairperson, All India Spices Exporter Forum, Tushar Shah, principal scientist, International Water Management Institute, Ashok Vishandass, chairman, CACP and Harish Damodaran, The Indian Express.

Charm in their own farm

People who quit corporate jobs for farming tell us why they switched fields

Are coffee and cardamom plantations more appealing than fat pay cheques and city life? Yes, say some professionals who are quitting lucrative corporate jobs to take the plunge into agriculture.

Take T Arumugam. Despite being the first graduate in his family, with five siblings, he gave up his full-time job with an NGO to try his hand at livestock rearing and growing wheat.

Vinu Kurien quit his bank job after a 12-year stint. He is now farming cardamom in Kerala. What drove him to give up stable employment and try his luck with the high-risk farming business? "The corporate rat race was getting overheated. Stretching work hours began to eat up my holidays. So, quality time with family was something that I could see only in movies," says Vinu. Likewise, for Ramkumar, who gave up his high-flying IT job as a senior

software consultant at Credit Suisse, Singapore. The promise of a peaceful life amidst verdant fields drew him to agriculture.

“The 2008 global financial crisis was a major turning point. There were mass layoffs all around and the situation was such that one could survive only by killing another’s job,” says Ramkumar. Despite being lucky to retain his job even during such turbulent times, his desire to get away from the madding crowd was the reason behind the shift from IT to agriculture.

Ravikumar Ramasamy, who was working as a textile engineer, now grows lemon on about one-and-a-half acres of land, and grows coconut and banana trees too. He is also the proud owner of seven cows. His cousin Balashanmugam, an MCA graduate, quit his job with IBM, the global IT giant, to start his own farm.

It's never too late

It is not just the young who have made such drastic shifts but also those who've had a long, flourishing professional career.

Age has not deterred PS Subramani, who is in his late 50s, from taking such big risks. He gave up his lucrative job in Zambia in 2007 and opted to grow coffee in Coorg — he had inherited part of a plantation from his father, he later added to it. “Retirement is when you stop working for others and start working for yourself. There is no retirement now after I took up this coffee plantation business,” says Subramani.

But quitting a well-paying job and starting a high-risk venture such as agriculture is no easy decision. In addition to strong financial backing, unflinching support from the family is crucial for success. Vinu Kurien has

been fortunate in this regard. He owes his success to the encouragement from his family. Subramani too acknowledges complete family backing.

For Arumugam, it was a rough ride as his family was against his taking up agriculture. He had to put in additional effort by attending training programmes conducted by the MS Swaminathan Research Foundation (MSSRF), Chennai, and the Tamil Nadu Agricultural University (TNAU) to understand the business better.

“The MSSRF and TNAU programmes helped me a lot during the initial phase of my venture,” explains Arumugam. His mother was his sole source of encouragement while the rest of the family resisted his move to agriculture.

“The transition from a secure banking job to a not-so-certain farming career was never easy. That I could not find suitable farm land for almost three months after I resigned my bank job added to my stress. But on the 85th day of my search, I came across a piece of land that met all my needs,” recalls Vinu Kurien.

For Ravikumar and Balashanmugam, besides family, friends too were sceptical initially. But after seeing them succeed in their farm venture, the naysayers are now convinced that they have made the right move.

Less money, more smiles

How has the career shift changed their lives? “I have gained back my smile and lost a few kilos,” says a smiling Vinu Kurien. “I now have the freedom to plan my travel without having to wait for approvals. I have more time to spend not just with my kids and immediate family but also socialise with my extended

family. In contrast, when I was employed, I used to come home very late, only to see my children fast asleep," recalls Vinu Kurien.

Of course, this comes at a cost. "The monetary benefits I had to forego are quite huge. But working for myself, that too in my home town, keeps me occupied and also compensates the monetary loss," explains Subramani. Ravikumar misses the company of his large group of friends. Arumugam misses the opportunity to meet people, afforded by his earlier job with the NGO.

More people should quit the rat race and take to agriculture, the backbone of India's economy. This is the message these people want to convey.

So, what needs to be done to make agriculture sustainable?

"Though the Government has been doing its bit to educate farmers, a lot more needs to be done. It should encourage farmers to adopt novel farming techniques," says Ramkumar.

Balashanmugam wants organic farming to be given more impetus. Ramkumar agrees: "in organic farming, the cost of inputs is much less, hence the capital requirement is much lower."

Subramani puts it in a nutshell: "Youngsters are moving out of villages due to lack of infrastructure and job opportunities. This should change. They should stay back and nourish farming."

Arumugam sums it all up: "India's future lies in the hands of the younger generation. India being an agrarian economy, young people should come back to farming."

(This article was published in the Business Line print edition dated January 19, 2015)

AP govt inks pact with ICRISAT to boost sustainable farming

HYDERABAD, JAN 18:

The Andhra Pradesh government has signed a pact with the International Crop Research Institute for the Semi-Arid Tropics (ICRISAT) to provide assistance in making agriculture sustainable and profitable.

“The agreement with ICRISAT is part of the State Government’s plans to increase productivity of agriculture and allied sectors,” the state government said.

The Memorandum of Agreement was signed yesterday in the presence of Chief Minister N Chandrababu Naidu by Special Chief Secretary (Planning) S P Tucker and ICRISAT Director-General David Bergvinson.

Through the agreement, the best technological tools and scientific practices from across the world will be incorporated into primary sector activities, said a State Government release quoting the Chief Minister.

As part of the agreement, the ICRISAT would prepare a “strategy paper” for primary sector mission, hold research and development and establish “sites of learning” in districts.

ICRISAT would also bring in international expertise from other CGIAR centres such as the International Livestock Research Centre (ILRI), the International Rice Research Institute (IRRI), the International Water Management (IWMI),

the Asia Vegetable Research and Development Centre (AVRDC), the International Centre for Improvement of Maize and Development Centre (AVRDC), World Fish Centre and the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI).

This consortium (of international organisations) will also bring in regional and national research institutions for the benefit of farmers.

Facilitation of detailed plan preparations for operationalising the mission annually by providing guidance and technical support to mission coordinator would also be done by the ICRISAT.

The institute would establish pilot sites of learning in 13 districts (10,000 hectares each) of AP for increasing productivity, profitability and sustainability through science-led development and climate-smart agriculture.

ICRISAT would also develop quality assurance system for soil analytical laboratories in the State, undertake capacity building for staff and help in upgrading existing soil labs for complete nutrient profile analysis.

It would assist in developing PPP mode guidelines, mobilise private entrepreneurs and prepare DPRs and organise a Global Investors' Meet, the release added.

(This article was published on January 18, 2015)



Expansion to nurture growth



Progress in its innovative research project can spur the company's growth

Stocks of agro-chemical makers have been on a roll, thanks to healthy financial performance.

Steady growth in the domestic market, healthy demand in key international markets and the depreciation of the rupee against the dollar helped the industry grow at a robust pace, despite erratic monsoon. This led to re-rating of stocks of pesticide makers over the last few years.

Despite the sharp rally, some of them are still attractively priced, considering the good growth prospects over a three-to-five year horizon.

Among these is the stock of Insecticides India. Despite being a late entrant into the Indian agrochemical market, the company's well planned brand acquisition strategy helped it quickly mop up revenues.

While the company's capacity expansion project at its Rajasthan and Gujarat plants will drive growth over the short term, progress in its innovative research project can spur the company's growth over the next five years.

At Rs. 887, the stock trades at about 13 times its estimated 2015-16 earnings, implying a 35 per cent discount to peers such as PI Industries and Rallis India.

Having started off as a generic pesticide formulator, Insecticides India has, over the years, morphed into an integrated crop protection player. Its strategy to acquire leading brands acted as the key growth engine.

The acquisition of three large brands from Montari Industries laid the foundation for the swift scale-up in revenue.

Expanding capacity

The company also strengthened its research capability by setting up a research and development centre in 2005 to launch generic insecticide brands such as Victor and Arrow. These are now among its top selling brands.

In 2012, Insecticides India joined hands with the Japanese crop protection major Nissan Chemicals to sell its herbicide brands, Hakama and Pulsor, which met with good response from the farming community. Besides launching generic versions of leading innovative brands, marketing tie-ups

with global players such as the US-based Amvac Chemicals for its Thimet brand enabled Insecticides India expand its product basket.

The company is building additional manufacturing capacities which can drive growth in the near term.

Its formulation manufacturing capacity at Rajasthan has been expanded by 25 per cent to 75,000 tonnes per annum.

The company is expanding its active ingredient facility in Gujarat by putting up two additional lines; the total number of lines will then stand at 12.

The new capacity is expected to become operational by first quarter of the next fiscal.

According to the management, these investments can help the company double its revenue over the next three to four years.

On discovery mode

Insecticides India is in a transition phase — from a pure generics company to an innovative agrochemical maker.

The company is working on discovery of new molecules through a joint venture with the Japan-based Oatsuka Agri Techno Company, in which Insectides India holds 20 per cent stake.

With 35 scientists working on a few innovative molecules, the company expects to launch its first product over the next four years.

However, given the risk associated with innovative research, delay beyond four years cannot be ruled out.

Insecticides India's current product basket consists of 120 brands.

This includes flagship brands such as Victor, Thimet, Nuvan, Lethal and Monocil.

The top 20 brands account for almost 75 per cent of the company's revenue — the product concentration is lesser compared with peers such as Excel Crop Care.

In the first half of 2014-15, the company's revenue grew 22 per cent to Rs. 654 crore compared with the same period last year.

Operating profit margin expanded by 1.7 percentage points to 11.7 per cent during this period. Net profit grew 44 per cent to Rs. 40 crore.



Technology integration imperative in agri, food business: Amaethon

Amidst growing challenges and changing food habits in the agri and food business, technology integration has become imperative, said experts at the ongoing Amaethon_2015, the food and agribusiness summit organised by students of Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad.

"Growing challenges in the agri business and food business has made use of technology and its integration imperative in the current scenario," said Balwant Singh, Director, Seedbuzz as one of the panellists in the 'ICT Dialogue' panel discussion during Amaethon.

The three-day event witnessed several sessions including panel discussions on various issues like ICT, venture space and development agenda through agriculture, among others.

In her keynote address, Mohini Datt, Research Analyst, World Bank, highlighted the need for cooperation that countries of South Asia should think of in view of their shared geography.

This was followed by IIM-A faculty member G. Raghuram's address that traced the evolution of IIMA and the Post Graduate Programme in Agribusiness Management and IIMA faculty member and faculty advisor - Amaethon 2015 Vasant Gandhi's talk on challenges facing Indian Agriculture due to growing population with scarce resources, urban migration of labour, liberalisation, and advent of new technologies and changing food habits of the population.

Gandhi highlighted Amaethon has moved on from being a small event to the one which this year has attracted nearly 600 participants from across the country and even overseas for the first time.

As part of the panel discussion on 'Food Dialogue', panellists spoke of the need of food security and suggested various ways like efficient PDS, introduction and commercialisation of GM food crops, extrapolating the growth and success strategy of dairy in other sectors of agriculture etc. to ensure food security.

THE ECONOMIC TIMES

NEW DELHI: The central government's Rs 1,000-crore irrigation scheme aims at bringing irrigation water to every village by converging ongoing schemes being implemented by various ministries.

Under the project, a dynamic annual fund allocation methodology, which mandates states to allot more funds to irrigation sectors for becoming eligible to access funds under this scheme, is also being considered.

"A number of central schemes are currently operational to augment irrigation coverage in the country. However, the desired goal of bringing irrigation water to every village farm is still far from reality, primarily due to fragmented approach followed by existing schemes," said a concept paper on the Pradhan Mantri Krishi Sinchayee Yojana (PMKSY).

PMKSY has been envisaged to connect the irrigation system's three crucial components -- water sources, distribution network and field applications -- for optimal usage, the paper, prepared by the Agriculture Ministry, said.

The new irrigation scheme assumes importance as 65 per cent of the total 142 million hectares of farm land in the country are still not covered under irrigation.

The PMKSY intends to focus on 'end-to-end solution' in irrigation supply chain by implementing the new programme in a "project mode" with decentralised state-level planning and execution.

"Instead of conventional top-down approach, the programme will provide

requisite flexibility to state government's in planning and executing the irrigation projects," it said.

The Agriculture Ministry said in the note that the PMKSY projects would be scrutinised by the State Level Project Screening Committee (SLPSC) and sanctioned by the State Level Sanctioning Committee, already set under Rashtriya Krishi Vikas Yojana.

The state agriculture department would be the nodal agency for implementation of PMKSY projects, while there would also be an inter-ministerial National Steering Committee (NSC) for periodic review of the same.

On PMKSY funds allocation, the Ministry said in the note that "a state will become eligible to access PMKSY funds only if it has prepared the district irrigation plans and state irrigation plans and sustained an increasing expenditure trend in irrigation sector in state plan."

PMKSY funds would be given to states as 75 per cent grant by the central government and the remaining 25 per cent share is to be borne by the state government. For northeastern region and hilly states, the funding pattern would be 90:10.

Funds not a constraint for taking up horticultural activities: CM Nabam Tuki

ITANAGAR: Funds will not be a constraint for taking up horticultural activities in Arunachal Pradesh as the state-owned Apex Bank recently inked a MoU with National Schedule Tribe Financial Corporation, Chief Minister Nabam Tuki has said.

According to the MoU, the funding agency has agreed to give financial support for promotion of horticulture and agriculture sectors among others, Tuki said while inaugurating a two-day Orange Festival at Dambuk in Lower Dibang Valley year, the press note added.

Greeting the people on the occasion, Tuki praised Dambuk for being famous for orange orchard and said that traders from Bangladesh also come to buy the orange.

"Festival should not be a means to spend money rather it should be means to generate income," he said and suggested that the festival would be continued in a larger platform by creating permanent structure to sell the oranges and that way Dambuk can become a model horticulture centre.

Responding to the various representations being submitted by the people, he assured to establish offices of Power and PHED.

He also assured to provide fund for Bomjir-Paglam road and further assured that he will take up flood control issue at Dambuk in next financial year, the press note added.

Andhra Pradesh government inks pact with ICRISAT to boost sustainable farming

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hectares each) of AP for increasing productivity, profitability and sustainability through science-led development and climate-smart agriculture.

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It would assist in developing PPP mode guidelines, mobilising private entrepreneurs and preparing DPRs and organise Global Investors Meet, the release added.

Agriculture experts seek check on cheap imports, market reforms

NEW DELHI: Expressing concern over falling prices of agriculture commodities, farm experts today demanded that the government should take steps curb cheap imports, give higher support price and boost investment in the sector.

In a pre-budget meeting with Finance Minister Arun Jaitley, experts also sought early implementation of the BJP's election manifesto promises to fix higher support prices and the setting up of 'Kisan TV' channel.

Jaitley, in his opening remark, said: "Our aim is to move towards National Common Market for agri-commodities and improve the supply chain. With the cooperation of states, we propose to move ahead on GST and APMC reforms."

He said the government has taken a number of policy decisions in last few months to make the sector more vibrant.

In an official statement, the government said it received various suggestions including higher support price by incorporating cost of production, and profits to farmers.

Experts also demanded that MSP be linked with inflation index, decentralisation of foodgrains procurement and clear policy on genetically modified crops.

"It's a long list of small things. We advocate small investments that chip away at the rough edges rather than grand gestures that don't amount to much," Bharat Krishak Samaj Chairman Ajay Vir Jakhar said in the meeting.

Seeking lifting of restrictions on farm exports, he said that there should be maximum import duty on fresh fruit and vegetables, cooking oil and other commodities to protect domestic farmers from price fall.

He also demanded funds for agri research and development to be raised to 1 per cent of the sector's GDP, special focus on fodder and funds for increasing agri-market yards.

Putting forth the concerns of coffee, tea and rubber growers at the meeting, the United Planters' Association of Southern India (UPASI) President Vijayan Rajes said he has sought quantitative restrictions or safeguard duties to curb rubber imports, thereby arrest sharp fall in rubber prices.

He also demanded some funds to import technological tools for coffee growers and concessional duties on farm implement to help plantation growers.

The Modi-government is not focusing much on agriculture, Consortium of Indian Farmers Association (CIFA) Secretary General Bojja Dasaratha Rami Reddy said after the meeting.

Maharashtra produces 43 lakh tonnes of sugar till mid-January

MUMBAI: Maharashtra has produced 43 lakh tonnes of sugar as on January 15 as compared to 31 lakh tonnes till January 15 last year.

As many as 173 sugar mills were in operation in the State as on January 15 and their output was 43 lakh tonnes. Last year, as on January 15, 154 sugar mills were in operation and they produced 31 lakh tonnes, Indian Sugar Mills Association (ISMA) said in a statement here.

Since crushing operations in all Maharashtra-based sugar mills are in full swing due to better availability of sugarcane, their production has gone up as compared to last year, ISMA said.

In Karnataka, 63 sugar mills, which were in operation as on January 15 this year, have produced 17 lakh tonnes of the sweetener, the same as last year.

Ex-mill sugar prices in all parts of the country remain depressed during the last fortnight. Accumulation of sugar stock, without adequate demand from the market both from domestic and global, are the main factors for declining trend in sugar prices, the association said.

From October 1 to December 31, 2014, sugar mills in the country despatched 58 lakh tonnes of sugar in the domestic market as against 59 lakh tonnes in the same period last year.

Due to delay in announcement of continuation of incentive for production and export of raw sugar, the mills are not in a position to plan their raw sugar production, it said.

ISMA asked the Centre to provide incentives for production of raw sugar and export thereof to solve the issue of the depressed ex-mill sugar prices and ensure the mills are able to pay cane price to the farmers on time.

Otherwise, cane price arrears of farmers, which crossed Rs 13,000 crore in March last year, may be higher this season, it added.

Sugar output up 19 per cent to 103 lakh tonne

NEW DELHI: India's sugar production rose by 19 per cent to 103 lakh tonnes till January 15 in the current marketing year that started in October on higher sugarcane supply, according to industry data.

"Till January 15th 2015, 494 sugar mills which are in operation have produced 103 lakh tonnes of sugar as against 86.50 lakh tonnes produced in the same period last year when 486 sugar mills were in operation," Indian Sugar Mills Association (ISMA) said in a statement.

Production in Maharashtra stood at about 43 lakh tonne till January 15 of 2014-15 marketing year (October September) against 31 LT in the year-ago period.

ISMA said: "Since crushing operations in all sugar mills are in full swing due to better availability of sugarcane, their production has become higher as compared to last year."

In Uttar Pradesh, production of sugar stood at 25 LT till 15th January 2015 as against 19.75 LT in the corresponding period of previous marketing year.

In Karnataka, mills have produced 17 LT till yesterday, similar to that of last year's output.

ISMA also pointed out that the ex-mill sugar prices in all parts of the country remain depressed during last fortnight substantially below the cost of production.

"Accumulation of sugar stock, without adequate demand from the market both from domestic and global, are the main factors for declining trend in sugar prices," it said.

An all-India average ex-mills sugar prices stands at Rs 2,500-2,600 per quintal.

The association also demanded that subsidy on raw sugar exports should be extended in this marketing year as well to check sliding domestic prices of sweetener.

"Due to delay in announcement of continuation of incentive for production of and export of raw sugar, the sugar mills are not in a position to plan their raw sugar production.

"Since only 2-3 months left before the crushing operations are over, mills are eagerly waiting for the announcement from the Central Government so that they could plan accordingly," ISMA urged.

In view of low prices, ISMA felt that 15-20 lakh tonnes of sugar needs to be

exported, enabling millers to clear cane arrears and repay bank loans.

It feared that the cane price arrears of farmers which had crossed Rs 13,000 crore in March last year may be higher this season if the Centre does not extend export subsidy.

CCEA nod to maintain higher buffer stock of foodgrains.



NEW DELHI: To avoid shortage of foodgrains once all states implement the food law, government today approved raising buffer stock and strategic reserve limits of Food Corporation of India for both wheat and rice.

For better management of foodgrains at FCI, the Cabinet Committee on Economic Affairs (CCEA) today also constituted an inter-ministerial group to offload excess stocks, if any, in the domestic market through open sale or exports.

"The CCEA has given its approval to revise the buffer norms of foodgrains in the Central Pool as follows," an official statement said.

As per the revised norms, FCI has to maintain higher buffer stock and strategic reserves during the second and third quarter of the calendar year, while lower stocks in the first and last quarter of the year.

Higher stock of 41.12 million tonnes should be maintained in the second quarter as on July 1 instead of earlier limit of 31.9 million tonnes, while 30.77 million tonnes should be kept in the third quarter as on October 1 as against previous norm of 21.2 million tonnes, it said.

However, a marginally lower stock of 21.04 million tonnes is to be maintained in the first quarter as on April 1 as against 21.2 million tonnes. Similarly, about 21.41 million tonnes stocks are to be kept in the last quarter as on January 1, as against 25 million tonnes.

The buffer stock norms have been revised as "the offtake of foodgrains under the Targeted Public Distribution System (TPDS) has increased significantly in the last few years. Further, the National Food Security Act has also come into force with effect from July 5, 2013".

In case the stock of foodgrains in the central pool is more than the revised buffer norms, "the CCEA has approved that the Department of Food and Public Distribution will offload excess stock in the domestic market through open sale or through exports".

For this purpose an Inter-Ministerial Group (IMG) consisting of Secretaries of the Food, Expenditure and Consumer Affairs Departments.

The government had last changed the buffer norms in 2005. The foodgrains requirement under the food law is estimated to rise to 61.4 million tonnes, as

against the current 54-56 million tonnes.

As of now, 11 states and Union Territories have implemented the food law, and the rest 25 are yet to roll out the scheme which aims to provide legal right on 5 kg of foodgrains per person per month at Rs 1-3 per kg.

Long term agriculture investment required to meet food demand: Arun Jaitley

NEW DELHI: Finance Minister Arun Jaitley today said there is a need for long term investment in agriculture for meeting future food demands of the country.

He asked the National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development (NABARD) to continue addressing the inadequacies in rural finance market and "thereby enhance its unique apex development bank status" for development of agriculture and rural sector.

Jaitley was addressing the Board of Directors of NABARD. Emphasising the need to support rural housing, he appreciated NABARD's efforts in allocating Rs 3,000 crore by way of refinance.

He advised NABARD to continue to provide "leadership" in areas such as financial inclusion, farm credit to the small and marginal farmers besides those farmers who do not have clear title deeds to the farms they till.

The Finance Minister also noted that NABARD had effectively utilised the initial corpus of Rs 5,000 crore of Long Term Rural Credit Fund allocated in the budget.

He also launched two NABARD supported e-commerce portals - ekraftindia and shilpicraft - for marketing of handicrafts and artisan products of Self Help Groups (SHGs).

A roadmap for digitisation of SHGs across the country was also unveiled on the occasion.

There are 73 lakh SHGs in the country and digitisation is expected to lead to better participation of the members of the SHGs in the Jan Dhan Yojna.

NABARD Board comprises of Secretaries of Central Government, Deputy Governor of RBI and Additional Chief Secretaries of select States.

CCEA hikes sugarcane fair price to Rs 230/qtl for 2015-16



NEW DELHI: The Cabinet Committee on Economic Affairs (CCEA) today approved a Rs 10 per quintal increase in the fair and remunerative price (FRP) for sugarcane to Rs 230 for the 2015-16 season (October-September).

The FRP is the minimum price that sugarcane farmers are legally guaranteed. However, state governments are free to fix their own state advised price (SAP) and millers can offer any price above the FRP.

The government has fixed sugarcane price at Rs 220 per quintal for the current 2014-15 season.

"The CCEA has approved the FRP of sugarcane payable by sugar mills for the 2015-16 sugar season to be fixed at Rs 230 per quintal. This decision will ensure a guaranteed price to cane growers," an official statement said.

The FRP will be linked to a basic recovery rate of 9.5 per cent, subject to a premium of Rs 2.42 per quintal for every 0.1 percentage point increase in recovery above that level, it added.

The CCEA has approved in toto the recommendation of the Commission for Agricultural Costs and Prices (CACP), a statutory body that advises the government on the pricing policy for major farm produce.

The FRP is fixed after taking into consideration the margins for sugarcane farmers, based on the cost of production of sugarcane, including the cost of transportation.

Worsening climatic dynamics poses threat to Darjeeling tea.

SILIGURI: Increasing atmospheric temperature is affecting the quality and quantity of Darjeeling tea, threatening the livelihood of more than two lakh families that depend of the tea gardens in the Eastern Himalayan hills.

Tea is a major economic pillar of Darjeeling, which produces around 10 million kilogram of processed tea from plantations spread across nearly 50,000 acres. Global warming and an increasing influx of people are affecting this environmentally important region, in turn hurting tea production.

Temperatures have been continuously increasing. For instance, the average January day-time temperature has risen to 13.9 degree Celsius so far this year from 13.8 degrees in 2014 and 13.3 degrees the year before. Minimum temperatures have also shown an uptrend during this period. Relative humidity - another key factor for tea bushes - has fallen to 70 per cent this year from 76 per cent in 2013.

"Tea bushes love chill and moisture. During the no-leaf-plucking period from end-December to mid-February, the bushes need sufficiently low temperature and adequate moisture level in air for proper rejuvenation of health. Any trouble in that can badly impact year-long yield," said D Bargohain, an expert at the Tea Research Association.

The conditions aren't expected to improve, say weather experts.

This situation is "compelling many planters to consider higher level of inorganic yield boosters to compensate. But that may pull down price of this premium tea in the international quality-conscious market," said a planter.

While controlling natural changes would be difficult, experts say authorities should at least try reducing the impact caused by humans.

According to census figures, population in Darjeeling district had grown nearly nine times between 1951 and 2001, compared with an about threefold jump in

the national average, said DP Kar, a socio-political observer. The largely unplanned and rapid urbanisation to accommodate this population growth is imparting pressure on green cover of the area hampering climatic condition.

"Policy makers must stop looking through political eyes. But should use logical and technical mind if they want to revert the scenario," said Kar.

SIMA asks CCI to commence MSP operations in Tamil Nadu.

COIMBATORE: With Tamil Nadu likely to produce six lakh bales of cotton this season, Southern India Mills' Association (SIMA) has asked the Centre to direct Cotton Corporation of India to get ready for MSP operations in the state.

CCI has not undertaken any commercial or MSP operations in Tamil Nadu in last 20 years as the state was one of the lowest cotton producing states, SIMA said in a statement here.

Against the background of current market prices of kapas (seed cotton) ruling much lower than MSP and arrivals likely to pick up soon, CCI can begin MSP operations in Tamil Nadu, SIMA Chairman T Rajkumar was quoted as saying in the statement.

The Tamil Nadu government has allocated Rs 50 crore to set up a Cotton Cultivation Mission to increase production from six lakh bales to 30 lakh bales and the government has involved SIMA in implementing the programme jointly across the state, he said.

Though India is likely to export around 90 lakh bales this season and consume around 300 lakh bales, leaving a safer closing stock, the international cotton

scenario and Chinese cotton policy are worrying factors for the cotton community, he added.

Rajkumar said both central and state governments should take steps and make CCI intervene and commence MSP operations to sustain the confidence of farmers and help the state make substantial progress in Cotton Cultivation Mission.

SIMA has sent a representation to the Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu appealing to insist the Centre to direct CCI to undertake MSP operations in the state.

Since MSP of Indian cotton is much higher than New York Futures, the international price and its poor offtake has seriously affected Indian farmers this cotton season, he said.

The Centre has already directed CCI to allocate necessary funds to procure over 100 lakh bales in the current season under MSP operations.

Of around 170 lakh bales which arrived in market, CCI has covered around 50 lakh bales, predominantly from Telangana, Rajkumar added.

Sell maize immediately on harvest: TNAU's advice to farmers



COIMBATORE: Tamil Nadu Agricultural University (TNAU) has advised maize farmers to sell their produce immediately on harvest saying the price for good quality crop could hover around Rs 1,250-1,300 per quintal in February-March with little chance for increase after that.

The Agro Marketing Intelligence and Business Promotion Centre in TNAU stated this after analysis of farm gate prices of maize in the last 12 years in Udumalpet regulated market to provide market intelligence for major maize growing districts.

The prevailing price is Rs 1,170-1,230 per quintal. TNAU said maize grains with moisture content of less than 12 per cent, damage free, mature and impurity free are considered to be of good quality.

Arrivals from Udumalpet, Virudhunagar, Arrupukottai and Dindigul will commence from mid-January onwards and current arrivals from Karnataka are expected to end with February.

The cultivation area reduced by 26 per cent in 2013-14 due to diversification of cropping pattern, particularly to cotton, by farmers following good monsoon, the analysis said

DECCAN Chronicle

Soon licences for coconut farmer societies.

Kochi: The government will soon issue licenses for 173 societies of the coconut farmers in the state for producing sweet toddy popularly known as neera, excise minister K Babu said Saturday.

Speaking after launching ThiruKochi neera brand produced by the societies of coconut farmers in Ernakulam, Babu said neera based products such as chocolate have good export potential.

The decision to issue license to tap neera for the societies represent the dismantling 112 year old system introduced by the erstwhile British rulers, said TK Jose, Chairman of the Coconut Development Board.

According to Jose the projects submitted by the various companies formed by the producers societies plan to sell 40 per cent of the production as neera and the rest as value-added products.

Tech business set to bloom

Kochi: The technology industry in India is in for fast growth in the coming

years and offers a unique opportunity for startup companies, R Chandrasekharan, executive vice-chairman, Cognizant Technology Solutions, said here on Saturday.

Speaking at a panel discussion at TiEcon Kerala 2014 meet, Chandrasekharan said technology disrupts business and creates new opportunities.

“Sales on the Thanksgiving Day in the US went down by 10 per cent this year online sales went up 20 per cent on the Cyber Monday,” he said.

He advised budding entrepreneurs not set up startups for quick money, but be prepared for a long haul. Entrepreneurs must look for viable partnerships with big companies, he said.

Aruna Jayanthi, CEO of Capgemini India, said there is little point in being unique, but it matters if one can help a customer improve his business. “And it is very important to stop an enterprise if it is not viable,” she said.

SunTech Business Solutions CEO K Nanda Kumar said domain expertise is critical to the success of an enterprise. “Entrepreneurs must have problem solving skills and should bet for the big. It’s important that one should be able to identify a need,” he said.

According to Rajesh S Upadhyaya, chairperson, IIM-K, Kochi campus, IT start-ups in Kerala may focus on tourism, financial services and Ayurveda as they offered potential for scaling up.

Ravi Gururaj, chairman, Frictionless Ventures, said entrepreneurship is pursuit of opportunity irrespective of availability of resources.

There are areas which offered limited opportunities in which small companies can partner with the big ones, and help them improve their business.

And then there are the bigger opportunities such as education and healthcare in India where there is a huge demand for services," he said.

"With the kind of penetration mobile phones have made in India, startups can even concentrate on mobile-only applications," he said. V K Mathews, chairman, IBS, chaired the session. There were sessions on agri and food processing, product, packaging, design & innovation, and women entrepreneurship also.

Student's agri-copter a boon for farmers.

KOCHI: A novel idea of spraying fertilizer for paddy using a remote-controlled quad-copter ideated and put forward by a group of B.Tech students promises to bring much-needed respite to farmers troubled by shortage of workers, particularly in a state like Kerala, where farmers and their profession are decreasing in number. The AgriCopter won accolades at the Young Entrepreneurs Summit (YES), held in the state on Friday, and fetched Athul K. Shibu and three of his friends from Government Engineering College, Thrissur, a third prize in the category of "Best Innovative Ideas".

The copter that flies at a level of five to six feet from the ground with a payload of 10 kg urea can spray the fertilizer to about 22 acres of paddy land a day. This can save the labour of at least four farm hands a day, Athul explains, son of a farmer. In fact Athul got hold of the idea due to his involvement in paddy cultivation. "I used to assist my father in the farm after my studies and was

struck by the idea after a mishap occurred to him. One day, my father was bitten by a snake when he went to put fertilizer to paddy. And snake bite is common during farming. I started looking for a method by which fertilizer can be applied to paddy without stepping into the slushy field," he told. According to Athul, the copter, running on a rechargeable battery of the size of a eight-inch by six-inch brick, could be controlled by the farmer himself sitting in a shade and he can also monitor the operation by a camera attached to the copter.

It can even be controlled from a two-kilometre distance. "Farmers in Kerala are leaving their paddy fields uncultivated due to shortage of labour and also because of the high labour cost. The stage is set right for such a machine," he said. Athul hoped that his invention would attract more youths to farming. "Educated youngsters are now keeping off farming as they don't want to get soiled in a slushy field. Such a machine can convert a blue collar job to a white collar one," Athul explained.

He said that the first copter that would weigh not more than six kg (without the payload) would be out for operations in two months. The machine was expected to cost `60,000. "The copter can be shared by a group of farmers. Or someone can buy it and give to farmers on a rental basis," Athul added. He is doing the project with the support of his friends Job V.J., Sarath Marson and Arjun Ajay and under the guidance of Professor T.V. Gopinath.



EVERY FIELD SHOULD GET WATER, SAYS AGRICULTURE MIN

The Central Government has a dream that every corner of farmers' fields should get irrigation water only then production could be increased," said Union Agriculture Minister Radha Mohan Singh while addressing the two-days workshop organised by Indian Council of Agricultural Research at National Dairy Research Institute (NDRI) in Karnal on Friday.

"The previous Governments used to spend about 40 per cent on irrigation purposes despite of this, 65 per cent of land has shortage of water. The Centre would spend about Rs568 crore to distribute Soil Health Cards to 14.50 crore farmers of the country. This work would be completed by the next three years. A sum of Rs86 crore has already been approved this year for these cards," he added.

FARMERS' TAX LIABILITY LIMIT ON PADDY RAISED TO RS50 CR

In an important decision in the interests of paddy-producing farmers, Chief Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan has increased tax liability limit on purchase of paddy from Rs10 crore to Rs50 crore. He directed to issue a notification in this regard immediately. Due to it, greater number of farmers will participate in the purchase process of paddy and get appropriate price for their produce.

Addressing a high-level meeting with paddy traders at Mantralaya here on Saturday, the Chief Minister said that farmers will not have to suffer any loss.

Urging traders for cooperation, he said that the Government is ready to take any step for the farmers' welfare. The CM said that impediments in status of basmati producing State being put up by vested business interests will now be removed.

The PM Narendra Modi has also been requested to accord status of paddy producing State to Madhya Pradesh. The traders assured all possible cooperation in paddy purchase in deference to CM's views.

The Chief Minister directed for making arrangements to inform all farmers about rates of paddy. He said that it is responsibility of mandis to help farmers sell paddy and make all arrangements for it.

Agriculture Production Commissioner RK Swai, Principal Secretary to CM Iqbal Singh Bains, Principal Secretary Commercial Taxes Manoj Shrivastava, Commissioner Mandi Board Arun Pandey and Mandi officers were present on the occasion.

FARMERS' DEBT-ASSET RATIO HIGH IN ODISHA

Tense future awaits farmers of Odisha as of every five farmers in the State two are in debt. What makes the situation more scary is the State's farmers have borrowings disproportionately higher than the assets they have, when compared to with their counterparts nationally.

The recently-released National Sample Survey report on indebtedness brings to fore the 'risky' assessment of farmers here as it pointed that the debt-to-assets ratio of farmers in Odisha is 3.75 per cent against the national average of 2.4 per cent. This ratio hovers in the range of below 1 per cent to 2 per cent

for neighbouring States like West Bengal, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh and Bihar. Each indebted farmer household has a debt averaging to a whopping Rs64,120 when their annual average income is estimated at Rs59,712 only.

This home truth revealed by the NSS report where the average debt clocking up more than the annual income becomes the fertile cause of two farmer suicides in every five days in Odisha. The State witnessed more than 150 farmers' suicides in 2014, and in January 2015, a single district has recorded four farmer suicides in a span of only ten days.

Another disconcerting trend noticed in Odisha is a significant chunk of around 5 per cent farmer households recorded incidence of indebtedness even though they have borrowed interest-free loans, which the NSS attributed to borrowings from friends and relatives. Notably, suicide-prone States like Telangana have the highest incidence of 13 per cent followed by Chhattisgarh and Odisha. Interestingly, the Odisha Government's much-hyped low rate of interest (below 6%) on farm loans incidentally has the largest incidence (8%) of indebtedness followed by a high rate of interest (25%-30%) category, the sample survey has detailed.

Another interesting fact revealed by the NSS is that two in five farmers have no bank accounts (before the launch of the PM Jan-Dhan Yojana) in Odisha and a mere five per cent farmer households have the Kisan Credit Card (KCC). This brings to fore the lack of access to institutional credit for the State farmers. Moreover, the average amount of credit received by households per year under the KCC is only Rs12,070 against Rs56,000-92,000 in agriculturally-advanced States like Gujarat and Haryana. This aspect reflects

the lower capital expenditure in farming in Odisha and the consequent lower productivity here.

Sample the Catch-22 situation of Odisha's farmers. The Commission for Agriculture Costs and Prices (CACP) has estimated the 2014-15 operational cost of paddy production in Odisha at Rs1,032.97 and the total cost at Rs1,304.56 per quintal assuming a uniform yield rate of 32 quintals a hectare. But the Agriculture Department's data show that around 10 districts in the State have a yield below 20 quintals and another three between 20 quintals and 25 quintals.

According to Prof Neeraj Kumar, lower productivity means higher cost of production, and quoting the labour bureau data that shows an abnormal spike in agricultural labour wages in Odisha by around 16 per cent since 2012 and around 250 per cent since 2009. The rise in fertiliser and other input costs could jack up the production cost much higher than the 2014-15 MSP of Rs1,360 announced for Odisha. Even the CACP in its note admitted that the actual cost of production in Odisha in 2012-13 has been 55 per cent higher than the MSP. Senior OUAT specialists roughly estimate the actual price at around Rs1,400-1,800 per quintal. The loss, the indebtedness and the risk are then clearly calculable, quipped Prof Kumar.

BARGARH FARMERS RESORT TO DISTRESS SALE

Farmers of Bargarh district on Tuesday alleged they have been forced to sell paddy at lesser prices than the minimum support price as the market yards, which have been opened since mid-November, are not procuring paddy from them. Besides, they also alleged that paddy of Chhattisgarh farmers are being

sold at the mandis through middlemen, who earn a huge amount of black money. Administration officials and dalals have a nexus, they alleged.

Sources said some RMC officials have made false entries vis-à-vis paddy procurement while procuring Chhattisgarh paddy through middlemen. Bargarh Farmers' Association convenor Lingaraja has threatened that farmers would take to the street if the State Government doesn't resolve the problems soon.

GIVE PROFITABLE PRICE TO FARMERS: HARYANA

In a new initiative to get remunerative prices for the farmers, the Haryana Government on Tuesday urged the Central Government to replace the 'Minimum Support Price' (MSP) with 'Profitable Price' in consonance with the recommendations of the Swaminathan Commission under which the farmers would be given 50 per cent profit over and above the cost of production of the crop.

Agriculture Minister OP Dhankar said that after the approval of CM Manohar Lal, the State Government has sent a written communication to the Commission for Agricultural Costs and Prices wherein it has been stated that 'Minimum Support Price' for the farmers tends to become the 'Maximum Support Price', which fails to serve the basic purpose of providing adequate profit to the farmers and without ensuring a minimum lucrative and profitable price to farmers, required growth level in agriculture in proportion to other sectors of economy, can't be achieved.

He, however, said that if due to constraints of the resources, it is not feasible to give the increase of 50 per cent in one go, the Centre might strive for giving

20% increase in the average cost of production of crops in last two years plus 10 per cent profit in the first instance. He said that the ultimate objective is to fully implement the recommendations of the Swaminathan Commission by increasing the profit of the farmers in a phased manner, in coming years. This endeavour would put the agriculture in the country on a path of considerably rapid growth, ascertaining overall big boost for the economy of the nation.

Dhankar said that for paddy crop, the recommended MSP with the 20 per cent increase in the average cost of production of crops in last two years and 10 per cent increase on the cost is Rs2,193.10 whereas the cost of production per quintal including 20 per cent increase of last two years average cost of production was Rs1,993.72.

Similarly, the recommended MSP with 20% increase and 10 per cent increase on the cost of bajra is Rs1,557.48 and maize is Rs2,041.57 whereas the cost of production per quintal including 20% increase of last two years average cost of production was Rs1,415.89 and Rs1,853.25 respectively.

Likewise, the recommended MSP with 20% increase and 10% increase on the cost is Rs5,367.78 for cotton crop whereas the cost of production per quintal including 20% increase of last two years average cost of production was Rs4,879.80.

USE HIGH QUALITY SEEDS FOR BETTER YIELD: CM TO SUGARCANE FARMERS

The Chief Minister Harish Rawat has asked the sugarcane farmers to use high quality sugarcane seeds for better yield. The State Government will also provide all kind of assistance to the cane growers. High quality of sugarcane

will ensure good price for the producers and sugar mill will get more recovery from the produce. He suggested that the farmers must also concentrate on producing other crops. The private sugar mills have been asked to find out ways to pay the arrears of the sugarcane farmers. CM Rawat suggested this while interacting with the representatives of Farmers' Union led by National Spokesperson of Bhartiya Kissan Union (BKU) Rakesh Tikait.

The CM said that the state's cooperative and government sugar mills have given payment to the farmers and private mills owners have been asked to expedite the procedure of payment of sugarcane farmers arrears.

To facilitate the farmers' welfare, the private mills have been asked to make the payment of arrears. Even the government is ready to provide them loans through co-operative banks.

To ensure timely payment to the sugarcane growers, help is also expected from the Centre. Though the sugar mills have been relieved of several taxes by the state government efforts are also on to address the grievances caused by the stagnant prices of sugar in the national market and differences in the cost of sugar produce & MRP.

To solve the problem, the state government has also reduced the price of Urea and now it is cheaper than that in UP. The representatives of the BKU also apprised the CM of several problems being faced by the sugarcane farmers. The CM has assured them of efforts to solve the problems.

Present in the meeting were Rakesh Tikait and Union's Sanjay Kumar, Subhash Choudhary, Vijay Shastri, Sushil Rathi, Ranveer Singh and Dharm Singh Panwar among others.

RAWAT: GOM TO CONSOLIDATE HORTICULTURE, OTHER AGRO-BASED ACTIVITIES SOON

A Group of Ministers (GOM) would be constituted for better coordination among horticulture, silk culture, animal husbandry, fisheries, milk production, and tea cultivation. The Chief Minister of Uttarakhand Harish Rawat made this declaration while addressing a State level workshop titled 'Horticulture development in Uttarakhand- present scenario and future prospects' at Madho Singh Bhadari Kisan Bhawan here on Thursday.

He stressed the need for new researches in the field of horticulture and their percolation to the level of villages. Rawat said that the farmers of the State are doing a commendable work in the spheres of horticulture but the need of the hour is to increase awareness in this field. He highlighted the need of cooperative farming so that optimum use of the skills of farmers is made.

Giving an example, the CM said that if some village is doing better work in some specific field of agriculture, the nearby villages should also join in the initiative. Stressing the need for developing clusters, he said that the clusters of Mandua, Turmeric, fruits, vegetable, ginger, and flowers can be prepared and the State Government would provide all necessary help in this respect.

Rawat said that the agriculture equipments should be prepared keeping in mind the needs of agriculture in the mountainous areas. He said that the aim to bring agriculture and horticulture under one roof is to make a concerted effort to save our agriculture. Signifying the need for fodder development, Rawat opined that it should be done to augment the animal husbandry and agriculture.

CM said that work on land consolidation is needed to be done in the State and the neighbouring State of Himachal Pradesh made good progress after land consolidation. He highlighted the importance of developing water conservation models in the villages under MNREGA. Rawat also explained the significance of establishment of food packaging and processing units in the villages. He said that education and agriculture are two top priorities for the State Government as they are the paths of progress.

Speaking on the occasion, the agriculture Minister Harak Singh Rawat said that the state is fast acquiring reputation of a horticulture hub and is progressing in the production of spices and silk production. Parliamentary secretary Vijay Pal Sajwan, additional chief secretary S Raju, Secretary Nidhi Pandey, and large number of agriculturists were present on the occasion.

The Herald

Century farms celebrated in Geauga County.

Helen and John Sudyk look at a mural celebrating Geauga County century farms during a program Jan. 12 at the county recorder's office. The mural, by Bob Kolcum, includes photos of century farms, including the Clark Farm in Huntsberg Township, where the Sudyks live. The Clark farm was established in 1818. Helen "Billie" Sudyk's ancestors left Vermont in the winter of 1818 with a goal of setting down roots and earning a livelihood through farming in Geauga County.

Three families packed all of their belongings on sleds for the trek which

carried them over heavy snows.

Although Sudyk, 91, was never told why they decided to leave under such challenging circumstances rather than waiting for more favorable weather, she's aware of much of the family's almost 200-year history in the rural county.

Sudyk's farm in Huntsburg Township is one of seven in Geauga County documented as a Century Farm by the Ohio Department of Agriculture.

In celebration of the county's farming heritage, an open house took place on Jan. 12 at the Geauga County Recorder's Office on Main Street in Chardon.

To help commemorate the occasion photos of the historic farms were added to the painting of a tree in the lobby of the Recorder's Office created by local artist Bob Kolcum.

Sudyk, who said her farm has been sustained by family members through several generations, said her father, Hal Clark, was one of the first farmers in the area to make silage from grasses to feed livestock. She also maintains that the silo on the property was the first to be built in the county.

Asked about her memories from growing up in such a setting, she said "We really enjoyed the horses because we got to drive them. We helped mother in the garden and we helped her can. We had a really — almost I would call it — a perfect childhood until dad's heart attack and the Depression."

Sudyk also recalls her mother picking what many thought were weeds in the yard. In reality, she was gathering dandelions and other natural edibles.

She had a lot of nutrition they have now that they laughed at when she did it," Sudyk said.

"Geauga County is blessed with an agricultural heritage that has provided many historic, social and economic benefits to its modern-day citizens," said county Recorder Sharon Gingerich. "Our early farm families laid the foundation for today's food and agriculture industry — the number one industry in the state — which adds \$105 billion to our economy each year."

The Ohio Department of Agriculture Bicentennial and Century Farm program was established in 1993 as a way to honor pioneering farm families. Nearly 1,100 Ohio farms which have been in the same family for at least 100 years are now registered as Ohio Bicentennial or Century Farms, according to information from the Geauga County Recorder's office.

Mark and Kathleen Binnig of Thompson Township still live on the farm purchased by Mark's great-great grandfather, John Baur, in 1838.

"He purchased 100 acres and almost immediately sold 25 to a friend who came with him from Pennsylvania," Mark said. "When they came it was (all) forest so they had to clear the trees before they could grow anything."

He noted that his great-grandfather, Louis Keener, along with several brothers-in-law, put a halt to their farming in order to serve in the Civil War.

When Keener returned he built a house on the farmland which still remains today. Its initial tax record dates back to 1868.

In addition to selling various crops growing on his farm, Keener also earned a livelihood as a cooper (a person who makes barrels). The family still has ledgers from the long-ago era which shows the cost of a barrel at \$1.50.

Mark's father and grandfather's main business turned to that of dairy farming. He explained that the manner in which cows are milked today differs greatly from that which he recalls during his younger years.

"The big change my dad made was in 1954 when he put in a milking parlor," Mark said. "That was maybe the first or second milking parlor in Geauga County." Rather than working with each cow individually several can be milked at the same time.

No longer working hands-on at the farm, the Binnig family now rents out the property. Some of it is being used by New Creation Farm which raises animals that supply meat for upscale restaurants, including those owned by noted local chef Doug Katz.

Another farm honored for its century-old status is owned by Don and Judy Starr of Claridon Township.

In 1903, Don's grandfather purchased the property and soon after needed to sell about 50 acres to pay for medical bills incurred by his wife who was ill at the time.

Despite the hardship, the farm remained in the family.

Hubert Starr, Don's father, grew and sold hay, grain and vegetables. Beginning in 1950 he started growing Christmas trees for additional income.

Hubert was born in the same farmhouse on the land where he lived his entire life and also passed away there at age 95.

When Don and his wife, Judy, took over farming duties in the 1970s, they continued the tree business and also sold bedding plants.

Three of the Starrs' four children have built homes on the farm's property, including John, a son who continues to use the land to grow and sell Christmas trees.

Like Sudyk, Don has fond memories of his early years.

"Between the ponds and the woods, my friends and I spent quite a bit of time out there," he said. "It was really a nice time growing up."

In a past ceremony recognizing Ohio Century Farms, Ohio Department of Agriculture Director David Daniels stated "Historic farms are the foundation of Ohio's agriculture industry. The families have withstood the test of time, often through adversity, to provide us with life's essentials. We owe them a debt of gratitude."

5 things to look for as government writes new dietary advice.

FILE - In this Oct. 15, 2013 file photo, a cow eats in a feedlot at Suwannee Farms in O'Brien, Fla. Dietary guidelines released by the government every five years lay out recommendations for healthy eating. Next year's version may look at what is healthy for the environment, too. The idea of looking at how food is grown _ not just how it is eaten _ has already provoked outrage from the agriculture and food industries and even Congress. They say an environmental agenda doesn't belong in...

WASHINGTON (AP) — You've heard it before: Eat fewer calories, more fruits and more vegetables. Those recurring themes as well as some new advice

about sugar, salt, meat and caffeine could be part of the government's upcoming dietary guidelines for healthy eating.

Whether individuals listen or not, the dietary guidelines affect nutritional patterns throughout the country — from federally subsidized school lunches to labels on food packages to your doctor's advice. They also form the basis for the government's "My Plate" icon, which replaced the food pyramid a few years ago.

A government advisory committee made up of medical and nutrition experts is set to issue preliminary recommendations this month. It indicated in draft recommendations circulated in December that it may suggest some changes in current dietary advice.

US agriculture has big appetite for Cuba trade

MINNEAPOLIS (AP) — U.S. agriculture has a big appetite for freer trade with Cuba. From wheat to rice to beans, the industry stands to be one of the biggest beneficiaries of President Barack Obama's plan to ease economic and travel restrictions imposed against the communist-ruled island.

Agricultural exports have been among the few exceptions to the half-century old U.S. trade embargo, though they've been subject to cumbersome rules — requiring cash payments up front before products are shipped, and that the payments go through banks in other countries that charge hefty fees for their services.

As a result, Latin American and Asian countries with fewer restrictions and easier financing have gained market share in recent years.

The removal of such trade barriers will make U.S. agricultural products "far more price competitive" in Cuba, U.S. Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack said Wednesday as the Obama administration announced plans to restore diplomatic relations and to try to persuade Congress to lift the embargo.

Major U.S. farm groups including the American Farm Bureau Federation and National Farmers Union, as well as leading agribusinesses such as Cargill Inc., have long advocated normalized trade relations with Cuba, a market of 11 million consumers just 90 miles off U.S. shores.

Sales of U.S. agricultural products to Cuba peaked at over \$710 million in 2008, before the recession, but fell to \$350 million by 2013, according to the U.S.-Cuba Trade and Economic Council. Frozen chicken, soybeans and soy products, and corn are the main products Cuba now buys from the United States.

It's hard to quantify just how much of a boost the planned changes will give to U.S.-Cuban agricultural trade, said C. Parr Rosson III, head of the agricultural economics department at Texas A&M University. But he predicted it could grow to \$400 million to \$450 million within a couple of years.

"That's just a back-of-the-envelope estimate on my part ... but the market can make those swings very readily," he said.

Cuba remains a poor, relatively small country, Rosson said. Its economy shifts depending on remittances sent home by Cubans living abroad, tourism, and nickel exports, he said. But liberalized rules for remittances and tourism should provide an early boost in demand, he said, and easier banking rules will eventually make a difference too. The boost would be even bigger if Congress ever dismantles the embargo, he said.

"We're talking a monumental move to lift the embargo right now," he said. "But things can change."

Wheat growers in the Midwest expect new export opportunities since Cuba now buys nearly all its wheat from Canada and Europe. Cuba hasn't bought U.S. wheat since 2011, but could import at least 500,000 metric tons of it annually, according to the National Association of Wheat Growers.

"If Cuba resumes purchases of U.S. wheat, we believe our market share there could grow from its current level of zero to around 80-90 percent, as it is in other Caribbean nations," Alan Tracy, president of U.S. Wheat Associates, said in a statement.

Dry beans, dry peas, lentils and potatoes are also big parts of the Cuban diet. That creates more opportunities for farmers in colder states like North Dakota, though they'll still have to compete with cheaper Chinese beans, said Bill Thoreson, president of the U.S. Dry Bean Council.

"If we have normalized trade relations with them and are able to do away with some of the banking regulations, I believe there's some real potential to do business with Cuba," Thoreson said.

Rice producers in southern states and California are hoping to resume exports to Cuba for the first time since 2008, according to the USA Rice Federation.

"It's an enormous rice market," said Dwight Roberts, CEO of the U.S. Rice Producers Association. Roberts said believes imports of U.S. rice could someday reach the levels Cubans bought before the revolution.