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THE HINDU

Supply of mangoes likely to be affected



In not so sweet news for lovers of the ‘king of fruits’, huge loss of mango crop in Kolar is likely to have an adverse effect on not just the supply to places such as Bengaluru, but also affect its pricing.

The damage was caused by the recent spell of hailstorms in the ‘Mango Barn’ of Karnataka. Cultivators are a worried lot due to the fall in yield owing to withering of mango trees.

Srinivasapur witnessed huge losses of mango crops. It is estimated that yield in the region is likely to slump to 33 per cent as compared to last year.

Harsh Gupta, district nodal secretary, who visited the rain and hailstorm hit areas last weekend, said crop on as many as 2,533 hectares was damaged. The loss was estimated to be more than Rs. 27 crore, he said.

Horticulture, Agriculture, Sericulture and Revenue Department officials have been directed to assess the loss, Deputy Commissioner K.V. Thrilokchandra said.

Other crops affected

Banana, papaya, tomato are the other crops that were damaged by the hailstorm. Floriculture was also affected, including damage to flowers such as sevanthi.

Compensation demand

Though Rs. 18,000 per hectare has been promised as compensation to the farmers who suffered loss, the farmers in Kolar have demanded a relief of Rs. 50,000 per hectare.

Harsh Gupta, district nodal secretary said this will be brought to the notice of the government.

System warning animal presence wins Green Oscar



An early warning system that has saved precious human lives and reduced damage to property in the Valparai plateau, home to second largest elephant population in the country, has bagged the prestigious Whitley Award, or the Green Oscar, for 2015.

Beginning 2002, Ananda Kumar, a scientist with Nature Conservation Foundation, began studying elephants in the fragmented landscape where large expanses of rainforest were cleared for plantations in the late 1800s.

The plateau is also home to about 75,000 workers, who often came in direct conflict with the elephants, mostly early in the mornings or night hours, as they step out for various reasons – driving the community into a fear psychosis.

“The early warning system, introduced in 2006, has three measures in place right now,” says Mr. Kumar. Whenever elephant movement is noticed, the hotline run by his team, receives a message and is immediately passed on to residents within a few km radius on a daily basis. Around 3,000 families are connected to this bulk SMS facility, he says.

Based on the database built over the years, information about elephant presence is also communicated as a crawl on local cable TV network. This reaches nearly 5,000 families, mostly in conflict-prone zones.

Additionally, there are mobile operated light indicators covering 220 sq.km, which is more than half of the plateau. “The average number of lives lost due to elephants has come down from three (2.8) per annum from 1994-2002 to an average of about one (1.2) for the period between 2003-1015,” says Mr. Kumar.

“It is a collective work as the efforts would not have been possible without the support of the Forest Department which has a Rapid Response Team to protect lives and property,” he says. The plantation companies and local people are also big contributors to the conservation efforts, he emphasises.

The elephants also attacked ration shops, noon meal centres and kitchens of households, leaving property damaged. In the last four years, the damage to property has declined by half compared to previous years. In fact, there are mobile ration shops now.

By empowering the local community with location specific information, Ananda Kumar and his team, including Ganesh Raghunathan, have turned zones of conflict into co-existence.

As a next step, Mr. Kumar and his team is in the process of collecting data and understanding the human-elephant relationship scientifically in Sathyamangalam region to reduce crop damage.

PAACS staff stage demonstration

Employees of Primary Agricultural Cooperative Credit Societies staged a demonstration here on Monday to highlight their grievances pertaining to the unnecessary pressures they face at workplace.

T. Ananthakrishnan, secretary of the PAACS Employees Association, said that the employees were mentally harassed by departmental officers unnecessarily which eventually led to the suicide of a few staff in Chennai, Tiruvarur and other areas in the recent times.

“Officials from various departments are frequently conducting raids in fair price shops with the motive of harassing the staff. We want to streamline the checks,” he added.

The employees also wanted the authorities to ensure that the essential commodities were supplied in exact requisite quantity to the fair price shops instead of later finding fault with the shop supervisor for deficient stock. They also sought protection to cooperative credit societies and fair price shops’ staff from the hostilities of the consumers.

Lessons in agriculture for students

The Kerala Agricultural University (KAU) is coming up with a novel programme for familiarising the young generation with agriculture and agricultural research activities. The University has planned a five-day training programme at its research stations for students who have just cleared SSLC.

KAU Vice-Chancellor P. Rajendran has instructed all research station heads to conduct at least two training programmes at each station for a minimum of 50 students.

“The intention of the programme is to familiarise youngsters with different agricultural operations, farming techniques and research activities so that an affinity towards agriculture and agricultural science is inculcated in them,” said P. V. Balachandran, director of extension, KAU.

“The earlier generations had an opportunity to get familiarised with agricultural activities in their homesteads but today’s children don’t have such a facility. The new initiative will not only bridge this gap but also make them aware of the emerging trends in agriculture. The future of agriculture is in the hands of the new generation and hence we want to attract them and empower them with knowledge and affinity,” said Mr. Balachandran.

FOOD SAFETY

The government has issued orders constituting a high-level committee, with the Commissioner of Food Safety as the chairperson, to take necessary steps to check the excessive use of pesticides in fruits and vegetables coming into Kerala from neighbouring States, in discussion with these State administrations.

The Director of Agriculture; Director, Animal Husbandry; Biju Thomas Mathew, Professor, Kerala Agriculture University; and T.K. Siyavuddeen, Joint Commissioner (General), Sales Tax, will be the members on the committee.

Depend on local inputs to make agriculture sustainable, says expert



Green Revolution which in the initial phase had led to dramatic spurt in yields, especially of foodgrains like wheat and rice, is unsustainable in the long run as it increases dependence of the farmers on inputs from outside, proponent of nature-based farming Subhash Palekar said here on Monday.

Underscoring the importance of sustainability in agriculture, he called upon farmers to shun dependence on chemical fertilizers and other inputs from outside. Speaking at the inaugural of a two-day workshop on his way of sustainable agriculture organised for farmers from North Coastal Andhra Pradesh, he said his way was suitable for all agro-climatic zones in the country and had been successfully adopted by thousands of farmers.

“After the so-called green revolution the local base of agriculture has been destroyed in the country, with hybrid seeds and overemphasis on use of

chemical fertilizers and pesticides to increase yields, which has led to the ever-increasing cost of cultivation,” he said .

“It is the time to go back to the basics. Nature has provided all that is necessary in a given eco system and we should be conscious of the bio-diversity and try to preserve it. We can teach farmers to carry on cultivation, with minimal costs, using local seeds and shunning the use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides. The cost of cultivation can be recouped through inter crops and the main crop will be a bonus to the farmer," he said.

A couple of farmers practising the methods advocated by Palekar in Andhra Pradesh spoke on their experience. Kranthi, an engineering graduate cultivating a 45-acre holding in Vizianagaram district, was very enthusiastic about the Palekar’s methods. Suryanarayana Raju alias Fakir Raju from East Godavari is equally enthusiastic about the methods.

Horticulture ryots left high and dry



The Zonal Research and Extension Advisory Council Meeting of Dr Y.S.R. Horticultural University held here on Monday has left the horticulture farmers in confusion with no information on various aspects such as failure of crops, marketing facilities and irrigation subsidies.

Officials of Horticulture Department and about 100 farmers from Chittoor, Kurnool, Kadapa, Anantapur and Nellore districts converged at ZP Meeting Hall here. Several farmers from long distances reached Chittoor on Sunday morning following hasty information from the officials that the meeting would be held on Sunday.

Dr YSR Horticultural University Director (Horticulture) Dilip Babu, Director (Extension) R.V.S.K. Reddy, Director (Zonal Research) K.C.V. Ramana, Deputy Director (Chittoor-Horticulture) V.S. Dharmaja and Project Director (Micro Irrigation) M.K.V. Srinivasulu were present in the meeting.

Mango growers in from various parts of Rayalaseema deplored that they had no information from scientists and officials at the field level regarding ideal schedules for watering the mango plantations and no guidance to protect flowering and fight diseases.

The lemon growers in Nellore district brought to the notice of the officials their hardships with various diseases affecting the crop.

Horticulturalists engaged in crops such as blackberry, Regu, papaya and pomegranate said that their produce was prone to exploitation by the middlemen in the wake of no proper marketing facilities. A woman farmer said that the blackberry produce was purchased from the field at Rs. 25 per kg, which in turn is sold at Rs. 150 in Bengaluru and other cities.

Tomato growers complained that they were worst hit as there is no market mechanism to stabilise the prices. They observed that when there was bumper crop, the prices would plummet, and prices would soar when the crop produce is less. The farmers prominently sought the officials to suggest to the government to lift the ceiling on time frame for subsidy and acreage for drip irrigation system.

They also felt the need for increasing the Krishi Vignana Kendras in all districts, and providing irrigation water to their crops.

Meanwhile, on most issues, the officials observed that they did not come under their purview, but they would be taken to the notice of the government or referred to the related departments.

If it doesn't rain



On April 22, 2015 the Indian Met Department (IMD) released its first forecast for the upcoming monsoon rains, saying it is likely to be below normal, at 93 per cent of the long period average (LPA). Only a week before that, on April 15, a private forecaster, Skymet, had predicted normal rains (102 per cent of LPA). As per the IMD, there is close to a 70 per cent probability that the monsoon rains will be below normal or deficient, whereas Skymet pegs the probability of monsoon rains being normal to excess at 80 per cent. Since Skymet began its monsoon forecasts, the difference between the two agencies' forecasts has never been as wide. This has not only confused various stakeholders in the agri-chain, from farmers and traders to agri-business companies, but also raised the anxiety levels of policymakers.

Ideally, the chiefs of the two agencies should explain to the country the reasons behind such stark differences in their predictions. So far, we have not seen that. One can only speculate as to whether the prime reason behind this difference is the evolving nature of El Niño. El Niño refers to the

phenomenon of ocean water heating in the central and eastern Pacific, which is believed to disrupt the Indian monsoons.

Weather scientists the world over are tracking the current El Niño developments in the Pacific. Even though the Pacific waters started heating up in 2014, it was only in March 2015 that the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), the US federal agency monitoring El Niño developments in the Pacific Ocean, finally declared the onset of a weak El Niño. Australia and Japan also track very closely developments in El Niño and its impact on rains. Weather experts in all three countries (the US, Australia and Japan) foresee drier-than-normal conditions for the upcoming months for many areas in the west Pacific, mainly Australia and India, among others.



From what we can tell, the IMD seems to be on a similar wavelength as international agencies tracking El Niño and monsoon rains. But Skymet has its own take. According to Skymet, El Niño had already struck and disrupted Indian rains in 2014. Thus, it cannot affect the rains again in the current year. This is in contrast to the NOAA, which never declared 2014 an El Niño year.

But is El Niño so important for the Indian monsoon rains? Our own study revealed a rather interesting association between the two. We found that beginning 1980, the world has faced 12 El Niño years, while India has suffered seven droughts. Six of these droughts were in El Niño years, with 2014 being the only drought year in a non-El Niño year. Six El Niño years did not convert into droughts and contrary to expectation, in the El Niño years of 1994 and 1983, India received excess rains.

Besides El Niño, what happens in the Indian Ocean also impacts our monsoons. This is known as the Indian Ocean Dipole (IOD) or Indian Niño.

A “positive IOD” is found to be beneficial for Indian monsoons and a negative IOD hampers them.

The final impact on Indian monsoons is the result of an interesting interplay of many forces, including the IOD and El Niño. An IOD can worsen or counter an El Niño impact on Indian monsoon rains. India received normal or excess rains in the El Niño years of 1983, 1994 and 1997 owing largely to positive IODs. But the El Niño year of 1992 combined with a negative IOD and disrupted monsoons that year. So what are we to believe now?

Weather forecasting is still an evolving science — and a perfect and accurate forecast is yet to be found. Even though we hope Skymet turns out to be right in its forecast so that the country does not have to suffer another drought, it is only pragmatic at this juncture to prepare ourselves for any eventuality.

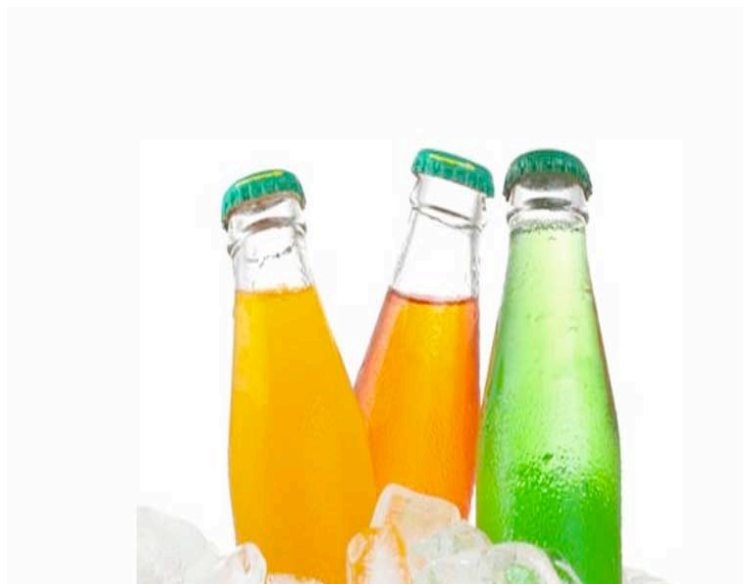
Given that almost half the Indian workforce is still in agriculture and a little more than half of the cultivated area is rain-fed, the news of below-normal monsoon rains is a matter of great concern. The fact that the water tables are also worse than last year’s in many states, such as Rajasthan, Jharkhand, Odisha, West Bengal, Gujarat, Maharashtra, Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand,

Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Andhra Pradesh and Telangana, aggravates these concerns. With two consecutive years of below-normal rains, the Indian peasantry will be in bad shape and agrarian distress has the potential to spill over to the political and socio-economic sphere.

What is the way forward? We need a contingency plan with ample supply of seeds and real-time technology, an integrated advisory for less water-intensive crops, extended agri-credit at low rates, and an affordable and robust insurance policy, which can settle farmers' claims quickly and transfer money directly to their accounts, dovetailing the Jan-Dhan Yojana, Aadhaar and mobile numbers (JAM).

satellites, with higher resolution, and/or stepped up all-weather stations (almost five per block) and rainfall loggers (five per weather station), using drones in affected areas if need be, to get better images for faster action. All of this is feasible and financially affordable (and would require an investment of less than Rs 500 crore), provided India has the political will to fix it and our bureaucracy is proactive in implementing it. The wise know how to convert a crisis into an opportunity for change, while others keep cursing their stars. The time to act is now.

Swap one daily sugary drink for water to cut type 2 diabetes risks



If you want to stay away from type 2 diabetes, choose water instead of sugary drink every day, as per a new study.

The research indicated that for each 5 per cent increase of a person's total energy intake provided by sweet drinks including soft drinks, the risk of developing type 2 diabetes may increase by 18 per cent.

However, the study also estimates that replacing the daily consumption of one serving of a sugary drink with either water or unsweetened tea or coffee can lower the risk of developing diabetes between 14 per cent and 25 per cent.

Researchers added that the good news is that the study provides evidence that replacing a daily serving of a sugary soft drink or sugary milk drink with water or unsweetened tea or coffee can help to cut the risk of diabetes, offering practical suggestions for healthy alternative drinks for the prevention of diabetes.

Committed to exercise? Stay away from Facebook

Sharing Facebook updates about workout goals may lead people to make fewer exercise commitments, a new study has found.

Researchers found that the prospect of workout goals being shared on social media led fewer people to set weekly goals.

At the same time, the sharing led to emotional encouragement, logistical assistance and accountability that may have helped study participants, who all were classified as obese, up their step counts by an average of about a half mile per day.

“One of the most common recommendations for people who want to lose weight is to share their plan with family and friends. The theory is that being accountable to, and encouraged by, their social support system will increase

their chances of reaching goals,” said Paul Resnick, the Michael D Cohen Collegiate Professor of Information at the University of Michigan. But the researchers at the University of Michigan and University of

Washington found that sharing was a two-edged sword.

“Public accountability is great, but not if it keeps you from making commitments in the first place,” Resnick said.

In the 12-week, randomised, controlled clinical trial, the researchers gave 165 people classified as obese FitBit pedometers and access to a custom website they had created.

At the website, participants could view their steps and choose whether to set a step goal for the following week.

The study put the participants in three categories, and people knew which one they were in. For one group, goals and results (whether they met the goal) were kept private.

In another, any goals the participants made were shared in an automatic Facebook update.

In the final group, the system updated walkers’ Facebook feeds with both the goal and the outcome (in addition to Facebook sharing, for the last two groups the programme sent emails to select groups of supporters that each participant chose).

Walkers made fewer commitments when they knew their goals would be made public. In the private group, participants committed 88 per cent of the weeks, compared with 78 per cent of weeks when the commitments were shared and 77 per cent when both the commitment and the outcome was made public.

While it appears that public accountability decreased goal setting, it also had some counteracting positive effects, the researchers said.

One was that walkers whose commitments were posted publicly were buoyed by supportive friends and colleagues.



THE TIMES OF INDIA

'Pesticides, chemical fertilisers turning agriculture non-profitable'

The huge expenditure being incurred on pesticides and chemically manufactured fertilisers has turned farming into a non-profitable venture, said organic farming expert Subhash Palekar, adding that agriculture could be profitable if farmers used environmental-friendly methods.

Speaking at a meet on 'Zero Budget Natural Farming' at the AU Convocation Hall on Monday, Palekar said the government could help farmers with an initial investment to ease the process. More than 6,000 farmers from all over the country participated in the event organised by a group of environmentalists from the state.

Elaborating on the issue, Palekar said cow dung and urine could be combined with jaggery to prepare the natural fertiliser 'Jeevamrutam', which helps enhance the process of photosynthesis, thereby improving the crop yield. Apart from this, the fertiliser also protects crops against 300 varieties of pests, including root and stem borers.

Urging the government to lend a helping hand to farmers by providing the funds for the initial investment, Palekar said the government would earn

quick returns and farmers would be independent of loans provided by the government or private banking agencies.

Palekar said the government should also play a key role by helping farmers market the produce by providing subsidised transport, market yards and also by directly purchasing the produce for schemes such as mid-day meals.

M Pavan Kumar, one of the organising members of the event, said, "We believe that by adopting this method, we will not only be able to sell healthy food products and provide financial security to our farmers, we can also help revive the local dairy industry, which in many parts of India is becoming non-profitable."

Elaborating on the need to improve dairying standards, Pavan Kumar said, "We are all aware of the fact that cross-breeding has failed miserably in most parts of India and is also wiping out many local strains that would have normally thrived. Take for example the Ongole breed, which is highly suitable for tilling the soil and can also produce enough milk. If this breed were to be used to provide the catalyst that we are talking about, we can infuse fresh lease of life into the dying dairy industry."

Speaking to TOI, newly turned agriculturist, retired Lt Colonel Emani Raman Prasad and his marine engineer partner C Sreeshanth said they found the workshop very interesting and were thrilled by the positive response of the state government that helped mobilise the event. "If they can help us take it forward from here, agriculture will see good days in AP," said Sreeshanth.

Gujarat govt to buy land in joint venture with farmers



Even as the Land Acquisition Bill gives heartburn to the Narendra Modi government for being branded as 'anti-farmer' by opposition parties, the Gujarat government has proposed joint ventures (JV) with farmers under the new industrial policy.

The new Gujarat model encourages farmer groups to give their land to Gujarat Industrial Development Corporation (GIDC) to develop industrial parks under a JV with GIDC.

While the scheme was introduced in a different avatar a few years ago, officials say it would work well at a time when acquiring land for industry has become a sensitive issue. The move promises to be a solution to contain growing discontent over agriculture land acquisition for industrial purpose.

The 'Financial Assistance to Industrial Park' (FAIP) scheme declared recently under the new industrial policy promotes JVs with farmers to develop industrial parks ranging from 20 to 100 hectares.

"Farmers will be made equity and profit partners in proportion of their land holding. Under the JV, farmers may continue to be owners of the land but may sacrifice their right in lieu of equity and profit rights in the park," said an official.

Saurabh Patel, state government spokesperson and in-charge minister for industry and mines, said, "It is a win-win model for all. GIDC faces a lot of

issues in acquiring private land. The new model will motivate farmers." Modalities of the JV will be approved by the State Level Expert Committee.

Industrial parks under FAIP will be provided financial assistance of 25% of eligible fixed capital investment in building and infrastructure facilities up to Rs 30 crore excluding the land cost. Additional Rs 20 crore assistance will be provided if the park developer (JV also) develop hostel and dormitory facility for workers. The private developer or JV of farmers and GIDC will get 100% reimbursement of stamp duty paid. Individual units will also get 50% stamp duty waiver.

THE HINDU BusinessLine

Educate the farmer



Sops are not enough, they need new ideas too

A couple of months ago, it was potato farmers in Bengal committing suicide. Then, a farmer from Rajasthan hanged himself at a political rally. Another jumped in front of a train. As the media reports all this in a frenzy, politicians are busy engaged in their usual mudslinging. People hanker to know everything about the farmers, and their sorrowing families will be shown on television screens. While the Delhi government is being criticised for not acting quickly enough to prevent the suicide at its rally, the AAP suggests it's a BJP conspiracy! And Rahul Gandhi says it all happened because of the ordinance that has been introduced by the BJP. And, we have a Union minister offering pearls of wisdom to farmers about gods and governments!

No one sees the farmers' point of view. Behind these suicides lies an explosive cocktail of natural and manmade factors — crop loss caused by erratic weather, deficient monsoon, a depleting water table, procurement woes, inefficient policies with respect to taxes and loans, and the deadly tentacles of private moneylenders. So what, say a majority of the urban population, they get free electricity, water supply, waiver of loans and all that!! Yes, but are these packages doing enough to address the plight of farmers? And how many farmers have access to 'free' power/water? Do these limited sops do anything for crop yield, farm inputs/loans, assured irrigation, developing cold storage, marketing/pricing facilities?

It is high time the government tweaked its agri-trade policies and the farmers, instead of being provided with meaningless incentives or false

assurances, were educated on crop insurance as well as alternative sources of income such as algaculture, mushroom farming, shrimp/prawn farming, dairy farming, poultry, fisheries, and so on.

As my son recites a couplet from the *Thirukkural* which roughly translates as “The reign of many kingdoms comes under the reign of those with abundant grain”, I think of the movie *Peepli Live* and smile wryly.

Rain, hailstorm may squeeze the juice out of mango exports



Digging teeth into a succulent Indian mango is likely to get costlier for consumers abroad after unseasonal rain and hailstorms between February-end and early-April lashed themango-producing belts across the world’s largest producer during the flowering stage.

The Mango Growers’ Association of India (MGAI) estimates that the damage caused is as high as 30 per cent in Uttar Pradesh, among the key

mango-growing States, while Maharashtra and Gujarat, which supply nearly 12 per cent of the delectable Alphonso variety overseas, have also been hit.

“We are definitely concerned due to the crop damage. There will be a domestic impact but we are not clear what will happen in terms of exports. A target is yet to be fixed but compared with last year, it is likely to be less and prices will be higher due to the limited amount of export-quality mangoes produced this year,” said a senior government official. Popular varieties sold abroad include Alphonso, Kesar, Banganapalli, Chausa and Malda varieties such as Langra and Himsagar.

Prices double

Procurement prices are already up with supply shortage resulting in export-grade Alphonso mangoes selling at between ₹3,000 and ₹3,200 per crate (of five dozen) in Mumbai’s wholesale markets, up from ₹1,750-1,800 at the same time last year.

“We are buying at almost double the price from last year. The quality is poorer and will further impact our prices. A clearer picture will emerge in May when exports usually peak,” said Murtaza Bharmal, CEO of Pune-based MSY Traders, which sells mainly Alphonso, Kesar and Badami varieties to the UK, Bahrain and Vietnam.

According to Agricultural and Processed Food Products Export Development Authority (Apeda) data, exports declined 26 per cent in 2013-14 to 41,280 tonnes from 55,585 tonnes in 2012-13.

A majority of Indian mangoes are sold in the UAE, followed by the EU led by importers in the UK, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Qatar.

After the import ban was lifted by the EU this January, Agriculture Minister Radha Mohan Singh had stated that the government expected mango exports to increase by as much as 50 per cent this fiscal.

Northern belt

An ASSOCHAM report states that UP accounts for over 23 per cent of domestic production followed by Andhra Pradesh (15 per cent).

Mango growers in the State, among the hardest hit by the western weather disturbances, produced 43 lakh tonnes (lt) of the fruit last year in 3-3.5 lakh hectares across 16 districts.

That figure is now likely to drop to around 28-30 lt, according to local producers, and prices for the main varieties grown in UP – Dussehri and Chausa – are set to rise by as much as 35-40 per cent.

“Dussehri was selling at ₹30-40 a kg and we estimate that it will rise by about ₹10-15/kg. Chausa rates are about the same. Production is down all over the country but UP is particularly bad with some regions such as Saharanpur worse off than others,” said Insram Ali, President, MGAI.

Exporters had been looking to capitalise on Dussehri’s growing popularity in West Asia and had expected sales abroad this year to considerably exceed the 8-9 tonnes registered in 2013-14.

Millers struggle to get quality wheat as unseasonal rain leads to lustre loss



As wheat harvest across key growing regions in North India almost comes to an end, procurement agencies and the private trade have to contend with discoloured grains this year.

The unseasonal rain that lashed a month ago damaged not only the standing crop across several States but also impacted the quality of the grain leading to lustre loss.

While the pace of procurement by the state agencies has gathered momentum, the availability of quality wheat has become an issue for the private trade, mainly millers.

As of May 1, the wheat procurement by the state and Central agencies exceeded 18 million tonnes (mt), with Punjab and Haryana accounting for most of the purchases at over 7 mt and 5.67 mt respectively. In Madhya Pradesh, the procurement was 4.54 mt, followed by Rajasthan at 5.33 lakh tonnes and Uttar Pradesh at 4.23 lakh tonnes.

Quality hit

Compared to last year, the trend in procurement was a bit sluggish this year, mainly due to delayed harvest, even though the Government has relaxed the norms for the purchases in view of the damage to the crop.

“The quality of wheat that’s arriving in markets across Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Punjab and Haryana is bad. It is not fit for making *maida*. We are struggling to get quality wheat this year,” said Adi Narayan Gupta, a Delhi-based miller and former President of the Roller Flour Millers’ Federation of India.

While the market arrivals are lower than normal this year, the Food Corporation of India has stopped open market sales, a trend practiced during every procurement season.

“We will wait for some more time and if the availability of quality wheat does not improve, we may have to go in for imports,” Gupta said.

Australian imports

Staring at a quality loss in wheat, millers mainly in South India have already begun contracting imports of the high protein wheat from Australia. “About 7-8 vessels of 25,000 tonnes each have already been contracted by importers in the country, from whom we plan to purchase,” said Pramod Kumar, Executive Director of Bangalore-based Sunil Agro Foods Ltd.

With millers in North India also exploring options to import, trade sources expect the cereal inflow to be around 5-8 lakh tonnes this year.

The trade expects a 10-20 per cent crop loss this year on rain damage. The lustre-less wheat that’s coming into the market is being absorbed, while prices are moving up slowly. In most of the markets, quality wheat is hovering around the minimum support price levels of ₹1,450 a quintal.

Traders expect wheat prices to firm up the moment arrivals slow down. The Government, in its second advanced estimates, had pegged the wheat crop size at 95.7 mt, but is yet to come up with revised estimates.

“We have been able to source some good wheat from the Jabalpur area in MP and around Allahabad in UP,” said MK Dattaraj, Managing Director, Krishna Flour Mills.

Protein content

The Bangalore-based miller has also contracted some Australian wheat for June shipment delivery in July.

“Though appearance of the grain is an issue this year, it is not very bad. It is perfectly okay for consumption,” said Indu Sharma, Director, Indian Institute of Wheat and Barley Research, estimating the overall losses to be in the range of 10-15 per cent.

Also, the rising temperature levels have helped address the issue of high moisture content. The moisture level is down to around 12 per cent as against earlier 14 per cent. Sharma said the size of the grain also appears to be smaller in some areas, though it would not affect the protein content.

Food Minister Ram Vilas Paswan had recently informed Lok Sabha that the wheat procurement may fall short of the initial target of 30 million tonnes due to crop damage following the recent unseasonal rain.

Punjab’s share has been fixed at 12 mt, Haryana 7 mt, Madhya Pradesh 6 mt and Uttar Pradesh 3 mt. The Government had procured 28 mt of wheat last year.

Ooty-based agri firm bridging farmer-retailer gap

On the face of it, what Ooty-based Lawrencedale Agro does appears to be pretty simple: buy carrots from farmers, wash and grade them and supply to retailers in cities. But hidden in the simplicity are some unique features that seem to escape the naked eye.

Everybody knows that if you give farmers timely advice on matters such as soil health and type of crops to cultivate, among other related issues, agriculture will blossom.

Hence, almost all large-scale retailers (Reliance Fresh, Heritage, More) have tried their hand at interfacing with farmers directly, with clear and obvious benefits to both parties.

But the problem with direct interaction with farmers is it is neither their core business, nor easily scaleable. Foundation

In 2008, four people with varied backgrounds — KP Nair, P Vijayaraghavan, R Balakrishnan and LK Narayanan — joined hands to set up an ‘end-to-end agri value chain’ company, Lawrencedale Estate and Farms, or LEAF.

It was the brainchild of KP Nair, a serial entrepreneur, who founded Microland, Computer Point and ETT Ventures. He teamed up with P Vijayaraghavan, an Ooty-based engineer. Together they roped in R Balakrishnan, one of the founders of CRISIL. Soon, another investor, LK Narayanan, joined them.

Since then, through its subsidiary Lawrencedale Agro Processing (India) Pvt Ltd., which has received private equity funding, LEAF has been supplying Ooty carrots to a phalanx of retailers, including Reliance Fresh, Big Bazaar, Big Basket, Heritage and Wal Mart.

Buying, with a difference

LEAF assures a base-price plus a mark-up if the market prices are good. The company’s CEO, P Vijayaraghavan, recalls that two years ago, LEAF paid farmers Rs. 15 a kg, while the mandi prices were Rs.8. Payments are made into the farmers’ bank accounts within 24 hours, he says.

Secondly, while retailers pick up only the best grades, LEAF buys all the farmer brings, and pays them the same price for all grades. While it grades the carrots and sells the top grades to retailers, the mutilated and out-of-shape carrots go to the HORECA market-hotels, restaurants and caterers.

With its own fleet of trucks, the company can also keep logistics costs under check.

The company plans to set up a new processing plant. But will things be the same after scale-up? Vijayaraghavan is confident of pulling it off.

Maharashtra gets ready for monsoon

The Maharashtra Government has prepared a contingency plan to tackle a possible agrarian crisis arising out of a gloomy monsoon forecast by the India Meteorological Department.

As part of this plan, the Government has set aside a war chest of Rs. 5,000 crore additional funding for farmers besides creating a buffer stock of fertiliser and 3.5 lakh quintal of seeds. Of the 17 lakh quintals of seeds required in the State, supply from corporate companies account for about 10 lakh quintals.

Punjab crisis

The Government measures come close on the heels of the recent crisis in Punjab leaving a blot on the Centre for its lethargic attitude in handling farmers' woes.

Speaking to *BusinessLine*, SK Sharma, Secretary for Cooperation Department, Maharashtra, said that in addition to the regular funding route through District Cooperative Banks, farmers this year will also get credit from Urban Cooperative Credit Societies (UCCS).

Increase in contingency

“The State has about 15,000 UCCS which provide credit of about Rs. 25,000 crore every year.

“Given the grim monsoon forecast, these credit societies are geared up to increase the loan exposure by 20 per cent,” he added.

Banks, credit societies and registered money lenders provide agriculture loans of about Rs. 32,000 crore every year in the State. Of these, funding for the busy kharif season accounts for about Rs. 22,000 crore.

Unexpected rain at the start of this year in Vidarbha, Marathwada and western Maharashtra had damaged rabi crops, including wheat, soya bean, jowar and fruits such as watermelon and grapes, which were ready for harvest.

Veeresh Hiremath, Head of Research, Karvy Comtrade, said farmers in the State were already hit by bad whether in the last two seasons and the recent IMD forecast poses a new challenge for many important crops such as paddy, tur, urad, cotton and soybean.

“The prices of these commodities have rallied in the recent past on the back of good demand, dwindling stocks and below normal monsoon forecast,” he

said. V Shankar, Managing Director, Rallis India, said that farmers were cautious on spending, but they will definitely put in their money on right products where they see value.

“The northern region is somewhat better placed due to irrigation, but Maharashtra is dependent largely on monsoon. It can be tough if rains fail as Maharashtra is very big in cotton, soya and corn,” he said.

Strategy proposed

Jagadish Sunkad, Asian Development Bank consultant and agriculture expert, said that given the farmers’ vulnerability to changing weather pattern, the Government should put in place a strategy to mitigate problems arising from climate change.

While creating a buffer stock of fertiliser and seeds for re-sowing, the Government should also consider the loss incurred by farmers in their first attempt, he said.

Use local seeds, shun chemical fertilisers: agriculturist



Subhash Palekar, an agriculturist from Maharashtra, believes that he has found a way out for the agrarian crisis afflicting the Indian economy.

Palekar, conducting a workshop here on Monday and Tuesday to familiarise farmers in north-coastal Andhra Pradesh with his methods, says, “After the so-called green revolution, the local base of agriculture has been destroyed, with hybrid seeds and overemphasis on use of chemical fertilisers and pesticides to increase yields.”

External dependence

Conceding that in the initial phase the green revolution had led to a dramatic spurt in yields, especially foodgrains such as paddy and wheat, he argues that in the later stages, it was found to be unsustainable. This was due to the ever-increasing cost of cultivation and dependence of the farmer on outside sources for all inputs from seeds to fertilisers to pesticides.

Palekar says, “Now is the time to go back to the basics. We can teach farmers to carry on cultivation, with minimal costs, using local seeds and shunning the use of chemical fertilisers and pesticides. The cost of cultivation can be recouped through inter crops and the main crop will be a bonus to the farmer.”

There are a few farmers practising the methods advocated by Palekar in Andhra Pradesh. Kranthi, an engineering graduate who has a 45-acre holding in Vizianagaram district, said, “I have stumbled on Palekar’s methods on the internet. I have bought six cows and am preparing ‘Jeevamrutham’ – a solution prepared with cow dung, urine, black jaggery and bengal gram. It is effective in increasing yields and containing pests. I am using only local seeds,” she said.

In a response to a query whether any studies have been conducted in her farm, Kranthi said that she has invited agricultural scientists to do so, but the response has not been encouraging.

‘Suitable for all zones’

Suryanarayana Raju, alias Fakir Raju from East Godavari, is equally enthusiastic. “I came to know of Palekar through one of my relatives in Maharashtra. I tried the methods tentatively in the first phase, but the results have been staggering,” he says.

Palekar says that his methods are suitable for all the agro-climatic zones in the country and “it is the responsibility of the farm scientists and policy-makers to give my way of farming a serious try.”