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THE HINDU

Good monsoon will boost farm output: Agriculture Minister

With the IMD on Tuesday predicting an above average monsoon this year, the government said it expects agriculture production to be better in the 2016-17 crop year.

Agriculture Minister Radha Mohan Singh told *The Hindu*: “If monsoon rains are good we will definitely see a substantial increase in farm production in the coming year. Agriculture growth is bound to increase.

“However, before announcing the estimated ‘growth rate figure’ we need sometime to assess the whole situation.”

Will spur growth: Experts

Agriculture experts and industry players believe that good rains could spur agriculture and economic growth and would support two-thirds of the country’s population that depends on farming for its livelihood. Punjab Agricultural University Vice-Chancellor, Baldev Singh Dhillon told *The Hindu* that the IMD forecast was wonderful news for agriculture in the country.

Time for good weather codes: M.S. Swaminathan

With the Indian Meteorological Department (IMD) predicting that there would be above-normal monsoon this year, there is a sense of relief, especially for the agriculture sector.

Following this, Professor M. S. Swaminathan of the M.S. Swaminathan Research Foundation (MSSRF), suggested that ‘Good Weather Code’ be developed and implemented at the panchayat level for maximising benefits from the predicted good monsoon.

“The good weather code involves action on mobilising the necessary good quality seed resources and the needed soil nutrients. Pulses and millets can be the crops of choice as they are nutritious and climate resilient. The good

weather codes must be must be completed in April with farmer's participation so that it can be implemented from May," he said.

Organic agricultural fair reaps a bumper harvest



ENDORISING PURITY :Actor Mammooty tastes the payasam made from organically grown pokkali rice at a fair in the city on Tuesday.– Photo: Thulasi Kakkat

It looked as if the Malayalam New Year arrived a few days early in the city as Kochiites gathered in large numbers at the organic agricultural fairs on Tuesday, nearly emptying the sales counters and asking for more.

About half a tonne of vegetables, ripe mangoes and other fruits as well as rice were sold at different venues. Organisers of the eleventh Organic Kerala Agricultural Fair said the rush at its counters at the Ernakulam Town Hall had begun before forenoon and it continued to increase throughout the day.

The demand was mostly for mangoes from different parts of the State, including Palakkad and tuber crops that included yams and colocasia. The fair is on till Wednesday. Winter fruits like plums, organically grown bananas and jackfruit products are also big draws at the fair.

Actor Mammooty launched the sale of organically grown matta rice at the Rajendra Maidan. The stalls were crowded throughout the day.

The actor called on people to support farmers who come out with safe-to-eat produces. Vegetables from a group of farmers under the Palliakkal Service Cooperative Bank, near Paravoor, were also on sale at the counters organised by the district unit of the CPI(M).

P. Rajeev, former MP and district secretary of the CPI(M), said the party would open more stalls of organic produces at different parts of the city. These outlets would be open on Wednesdays, he said.

The organically grown rice was being sold for Rs.55 a kg while the pokkali rice was being sold for Rs.80 a kg. Officials from the Korappadam Service Cooperative Society, selling organic pokkali rice, said the demand was beyond their expectations. The farmers were enthused by the market response, said an official of the society.

Punjab, Haryana take steps to check whitefly attack on cotton crop

Having witnessed extensive damage to cotton crop due to whitefly attack last season, Punjab and Haryana are taking measures such as pushing for timely sowing of recommended crop varieties to safeguard this season's output.

Experts of agriculture departments of both States are also undertaking training programmes for growers at village levels to apprise them about steps needed to achieve higher output.

Last season, whitefly pest attack had caused widespread damage to Bt cotton varieties in Punjab and Haryana, which had witnessed dip of about 40 per cent in output.

In Punjab, 1.36 lakh hectares out of total 4.50 lakh hectares of cotton acreage was damaged by whitefly attack while in Haryana, out of 5.83 lakh hectares, 3.06 lakh hectares were affected.

“We are educating cotton growers in order to prevent attack of any pest on cotton crop,” Deputy Director, Punjab Agriculture Department, Sukhdev Singh Sidhu said on Tuesday.

The department is asking growers to sow cotton crop timely as impact of whitefly attack was most visible on late-sown crop last year. “We want growers to complete sowing by May 15,” he said.

Sowing gets delayed in some areas because of late harvesting of wheat crop.

Punjab, which will see Assembly polls next year, has also hired 500 trained youths for educating growers through training camps to protect their crop from any disease, including whitefly attack.

“These youths will be deployed in cotton belt areas and they will immediately pass on any information about attack of any pest on crop to the department for taking urgent steps,” he said. “50 field supervisors who are BSc (Agriculture) will also be hired to supervise the 500 youths.”

Haryana will educate growers in a campaign starting from April 14 in cotton growing areas.

“We will inform farmers about weed management, recommend sowing of approved varieties of Bt cotton and seed treatment,” said Babu Lal, Deputy Director (Sirsa), Haryana Agriculture Department.

“We are asking farmers for weed eradication as it is necessary because they play host to whitefly,” said Mr Sidhu.

Cotton industry has arranged for a vehicle which will travel in villages in Punjab to publicise steps to save the crop from whitefly, said former president of North India Cotton Association, Mahesh Sharda. To deal with spurious pesticides, Punjab has taken adequate steps to check their sale, officials said.

Last year, opposition Congress had attacked the SAD-BJP government for the alleged supply of “spurious” pesticides to growers whose crops were damaged by the pest attack.

Experts this season will also suggest farmers to refrain from indiscriminate use of synthetic pyrethroids and all kinds of insecticide as it could aggravate resurgence of whitefly. - PTI

Officials pass the buck on foodgrain supply

K. Rameshwarappa, senior deputy director of the Food and Civil Supplies Department, has accused the Food Corporation of India (FCI) of not supplying foodgrains to State government nominees, including the Taluk Agricultural Produce Co-Operative Marketing Society (TAPCMS).

He said because of the delay in supply, beneficiaries under the Anna Bhagya scheme were not getting foodgrains in time.

Speaking to *The Hindu* on Tuesday, Mr. Rameshwarappa said FCI, under the pretext of general holidays, non-availability of labour and lack of stock, was not supplying foodgrains to the district nominees. As a result, the whole chain of food distribution has been hit, he said.

He added that the department had written several letters to FCI on this matter but the authorities had failed to rectify the problems.

FCI, being an apex body of the Union government and which, as a harbinger of buffer stock, has the responsibility of distributing foodgrains to the nominees, has failed to carry out its duties properly, he alleged.

Mr. Rameshwarappa added that he had complained to the deputy commissioner of Mysuru district in this regard, and he in turn has called for a meeting of officials from the department as well as FCI on Wednesday.

Meanwhile, officials of FCI, on condition of anonymity, claimed that the nominees did not have warehouse facilities to store the foodgrains. They said the nominees would give letters to FCI almost every month seeking 15 days' time to lift the grains.

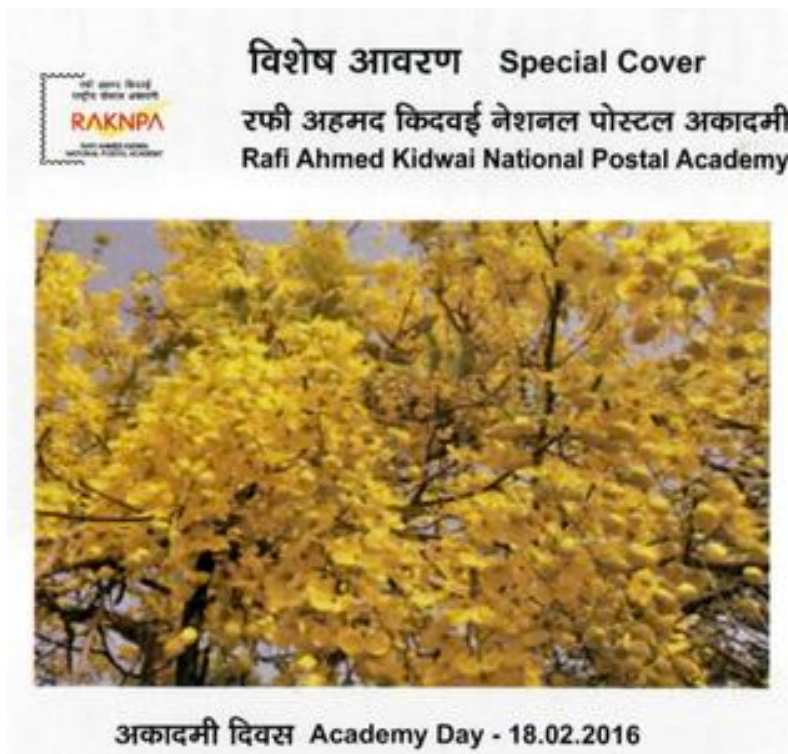
They said they had worked on many general holidays keeping in mind the interests of the poor and they discounted the allegations that they had not worked on holidays. They said it was wrong on part of the department to pin the results of these shortcomings on FCI. The officials said that they would

attend tomorrow's meeting and narrate everything to the district administration. All said and done beneficiaries under different schemes including Anna Bhagya scheme are not getting the food grains in time.

Beneficiaries under the Anna Bhagya scheme are not getting foodgrains in time

Beauty of golden showers captured on special cover

India Post training institute pays tribute to the flower



Adulations in abundance: A special cover on Cassia fistula brought out by Rafi Ahmed Kidwai National Postal Academy on February 18 as part of the academy day celebrations.

They are seen throughout the year now, but till the not-so-distant past, the bright yellow blooms heralded the arrival of Vishu, the harvest festival.

Rare is the soul that has not been moved by the beautiful flowers of Cassia fistula, also known as the Indian laburnum, their luxuriance signalling a

season of plenty. But Malayali hearts are not the only ones these soft, wispy flowers have gladdened.

The Rafi Ahmed Kidwai National Postal Academy brought out a special cover on Cassia fistula, or the golden shower, on February 18, as part of its academy day celebrations.

The academy, the apex training institute for officers of India Post, functions from a 20-acre campus in Ghaziabad. The campus has a wide variety of flora and fauna. Among the trees that grow on the campus are gooseberry, banyan, neem, and Cassia fistula, also known as Amaltas. Of them, Cassia fistula is predominant.

The cover is a tribute to the significant presence of the tree on the academy campus, the beauty of its flowers, and its medicinal properties.

Cassia fistula has flaming yellow flowers in spring and summer. Besides being an ornamental flower, it is used as fuel and for making agricultural tools. The bark gives an orange dye. Its Sanskrit name Aragwadha means disease destroyer. The bark, leaves, flowers, and fruit pulp are reported to have antioxidant properties.

Stamps

India Post had earlier issued a commemorative stamp on Cassia fistula on September 1, 1981. A definitive stamp, a regular issue postage stamp, of denomination Rs.20 was also issued on November 20, 2000.

The Kerala Circle of India Post had on November 1, 2006, brought out a Re.1 stamp to commemorate the golden jubilee of the formation of Kerala State.

A cover on the tree was released at a district-level philatelic exhibition 'Dwark apex' organised by India Post in New Delhi on October 20, 2011.

The Kerala circle of India Post has brought out other special covers too. The last cover issued by it was on the Muziris heritage on February 24. More than 1,000 covers have been issued by different postal circles of India Post this year.

Key role for Kufos in global shrimp research



Kufos will be involved in research that is mainly aimed at validating preventive medicines for shrimp diseases.— File photo

Kerala University of Fisheries and Ocean Studies (Kufos) will be a key partner in a multi-country global research project on preventing diseases in shrimp farms and boosting aquaculture production in Afro-Asian countries.

A statement issued by Kufos said that the Department of Biotechnology, government of India, had selected Kufos as a partner in the global joint research project for the benefit of small-scale aqua farmers in Asia and Africa. The United Kingdom, Bangladesh and Kenya are the other countries involved in the research project.

The project will be implemented through the U.K.-based Global Research Partnership (GRP), a research programme in partnership with the Biotechnology and Biological Science Research Council, the U.K., and the Department of Biotechnology, India, supported by the Department for International Development, the U.K.

The research is mainly aimed at validating preventive medicines available in the market for shrimp diseases and developing new low-cost products. The prophylactic health products (PHP), which are widely being used all over the world to prevent diseases, will be validated, said the press release. The

scientists in the project will work on the pros and cons of the existing products and will modify them according to the regional conditions, primarily focusing on the profitability of small holder farmers. Standardised assessment procedures of prophylactic health management capacity will also be developed in addition to improving regulation of commercial PHPs, the press release added.

The Cochin University of Science and Technology and the Central Institute of Fisheries Technology are the other partners in the project from India.

Farmers seek water release

Farmers want water to be released from the Papanasam dam to save the standing crops of paddy and banana in parts of Thoothukudi. These crops were close to the stage of withering under heat and desperately required water, K.P. Perumal, district secretary, All India Kisan Sabha, said here on Tuesday.

Water should be released from the dam through the North Main Channel to benefit farmers who had taken up cultivation on 5,000 acres in Thangammalpuram, Servaikaranmadam, Kootampuli, Sebathaiyapuram, Maramangalam, Theepachi, Valavallan, Umarikadu, Lakshmipuram, Korkai and Mukkani, he said.

These crops would survive for another five or six days without water and if the required water was not released, they would wither dashing the hopes of farmers, who were already affected by floods that occurred in various parts of Thoothukudi in November.

Thousand cusecs of water was needed to save the crops. Currently, the water level in Papanasam dam stood at 81 feet and around 300 cusecs was discharged to cater to the drinking water needs.

Hence, a team of farmers, including the district secretary of AIKS, K. Kandasami, president, Banana Farmers' Association, Srivaikuntam, and Ponraj, president, Srivaikuntam union unit, sought the intervention of the district administration to ensure water release by submitting a petition to Collector M. Ravikumar.

But the Collector, citing the model code of conduct, directed the District Revenue Officer, S. Murugaiah, to help the farmers. However, the District Revenue Officer rang up the Public Works Department officials for water release. “It was unfortunate that the Collector was reluctant to act citing the model code of conduct. Considering the legitimate concerns of farmers, such formalities should be relaxed to offer a speedy solution,” Mr. Perumal said.

Training in crop cutting

Additional Joint Collector Vasam Venkateswarlu called upon the officials to make crop cutting close to the farmers so that they can get benefit from the new insurance scheme being implemented by the Union Government.

Presiding over a training programme for officials in crop cutting held here on Tuesday, Mr. Venkateswarlu said that crop cutting need to be conducted based on rabi produce.

“It will be beneficial for farmers if we are able to complete crop cutting in time,” said Mr. Venkateswarlu. CPO A. Balaram said that crop cutting would be useful for farmers if it was completed as per schedule.

Farmers lead by example in digging water harvesting pits

Many such pits can be seen in Kalleda, Royuru, Parvatagiri, Gurumandal and other villages



Trendsetters: A water harvesting pit dug up at a house in Parvathagiri village of Warangal district.— Photo: M. Murali

Distraught by the depleting ground water level, many farmers in this mandal are voluntarily digging water harvesting pits in their houses and in agricultural fields and in the process are setting a new example for others to follow.

K. Nagaraju of Parvathagiri said that it was disheartening to see cattle craving to quench their thirst from puddles at bore-wells and hand pumps. Alarmed at the peak summer ahead, the villagers decided to dig pits near bore-wells, hand pumps, on the house premises and at agricultural fields. They are saving every drop of water at the sources.

The encouragement from the officials of employment guarantee scheme (EGS) has also come in handy for many. The officials were giving Rs. 4,000 for digging water harvesting pits at houses, and Rs 8,000 for pits being dug up in agricultural fields.

One can see many such pits in Kalleda, Royuru, Parvatagiri, Gurumandal and others villages in this mandal.

“We fondly hope that these pits will help us prevent fast depletion of ground water level and also harvest more water during the monsoon season,” Mr. Nagaraju explained.

The water harvesting pits built on house premises measure 4 x4 and six feet deep. The pits built at agricultural fields are of two metres deep and two metres wide on all sides. It is filled with three layers. The first layer is one-and-a-half feet filled with big concrete stones, the second has 20mm stones and the third layer is sand. This is expected to ensure that waste water goes into the ground and prevents the ground water level from drying up quickly.

EGS official J. Lingamurthy said that the government is encouraging people to adopt as many water harvesting structures as possible. “We are motivating people to dig pits on their house premises and there is good response,” he said.

Washington apple arrivals may drop by 50 per cent

India is likely to witness a 50 per cent drop in the import of Washington apples during the current season ending July 2016 due to a decline in production, a top official from Washington Apple Commission said.

Last year, India imported 5.5 million boxes, of 20 kg each, of Washington apples and this year, the figure will be in the region of 2.7 million boxes, Todd Fryhover, president, Washington Apple Commission, told *The Hindu*.

He also attributed the decline to high exchange rate and denial of entry through Indian ports for four months. Mr. Fryhover said: “The current season is challenging for us due to low yield. We are not exporting as much as we did last year. We are in India to build long-term relationships and achieve larger volumes.”

According to him, the U.S produced 2.8 billion kg of Washington apples during August 2015-July 2016 and it will end the current season with 2.3 billion kg. About two-thirds are consumed locally and the rest exported to over 60 countries, including India.

Mexico imports 15 million boxes of apples per year, followed by Canada with seven million.

Mr. Fryhover has been in India for the last two weeks, visiting about 60 traders and importers in different cities to help explain the low yield.

“India is a very important market to us. Apple is a cyclical crop. It is only during the difficult times that we have to meet the traders and thank them.

India ranks among the top five importing countries. Last year, it was ranked third and this year it will go to the fourth place. We hope the ranking will improve during the next season,” he said.

Mr. Fryhover also clarified that low yield and resultant or low arrivals would not lead to a fall in prices.

This Mexican crop is now a favourite with farmers



Cash crop: Chia is gaining popularity as a ‘super food’ across the world because of its rich protein content.— file photo

Thanks to the handsome returns that Chia gave last year, farmers in Mysuru and other districts are switching over to the crop

Farmers in some parts of the State are successfully growing high-energy foods like Chia, which is fetching them handsome returns in these times of agrarian crisis.

Chia is a plant of Mexican and South American origin and is known for its nutraceutical values. The best part of Chia is that its seeds contain about 30-35 per cent of oil. It is a rich source of Omega-3 fatty acids and is gaining popularity as a ‘super food’ across the world because of its rich protein content.

Given the proven potential of the crop, many farmers are now going for this super food. Thanks to the Central Food Technological Research Institute (CFTRI), which introduced farmers to the crop and also offered technical support for its cultivation, the area of cultivation of Chia is expected to rise in the coming days.

The Raitha Mitra Farmers’ Producers’ Company, an entity of farmers, those who grew Chia got great returns. This has been a strong point for others to

follow suit, said farmer leader Kurubur Shanthkumar, the founder-chairman of the company.

Mr. Shanthkumar, who himself grew Chia at his farm, told *The Hindu* that the company, which consists of over 2,000 farmers, had offered Rs. 25,000 a quintal to Chia growers last year even before the crop was raised, and the sum was paid when the crop was harvested.

Deal with companies

Companies that export Chia bought the produce from the company after entering into an understanding with it, he explained. “Despite a moderate drop in the price of Chia in the international market, the farmers were offered the price they had been promised,” he said. More than 100 farmers in Mysuru, Chamarajanagar and Haveri districts grew Chia last year, and the number is expected to rise this year.

The company has set up a processing plant at Hootagalli in Mysuru. “Over seven tonnes of processed Chia was bought from us by the companies (last year) and exported to countries like Singapore and Malaysia,” Mr. Shanthkumar said.

Two high-yielding varieties — CHIAampion W-83 and CHIAmpion B-1 — were developed by CFTRI.

Ready-to-eat ‘super foods’

Meanwhile, even as the cultivation of ‘super foods’ like Chia is gaining popularity in this part of the region, the Mysuru-based Central Food Technological Research Institute (CFTRI) has developed ready-to-eat foods from Chia and other super foods like Teff and Quinoa.

A wide variety of ready-to-eat foods, made from these high-nutrient grains, has been developed by the scientists, who recently displayed them at the ‘Open Day’ of CFTRI here. Farmers had visited the campus on the day and tasted the products.

The Chia Story

This crop of Mexican origin requires less water and is drought-resistant

But rain can harm the crop during flowering

Farmers can get two Chia crops in one year as it can be harvested in three months

Chemicals and pesticides cannot be used as the seeds cannot be washed, unlike other grains. Therefore, processing should be done well by adopting higher standards

Retail price inflation slows



The 'food & beverages' segment in the consumer price index eased to 5.3 per cent in March.

Experts say inflation trend could reverse in coming months

Consumer price inflation slowed to 4.83 per cent in March, the lowest reading in six months, government data showed.

The decrease in consumer price index was mainly due to the marginal easing of prices across most sectors, the most significant of which were the 'food & beverages' and 'fuel & light' segments.

India's industrial output as measured by the Index of Industrial Production (IIP) snapped a three-month losing streak to clock 2 per cent growth in February, the data revealed. The IIP moved to positive territory due to strong growth in infrastructure and consumer durables sectors.

But experts said the industrial output numbers do not reflect sustainable recovery and the inflation trend could reverse in coming months.

“Talking of 2 per cent growth is disgraceful. Our industrial growth should be at 8 per cent or so if we want sustained GDP growth of 7.5—8 per cent. We need positive numbers for three consecutive months if this is to mean anything,” said Madan Sabnavis, Chief Economist, Care Ratings.

“We continue to have flat growth and the 11-month cumulative growth is only 2.6 per cent, which is lower than the 2.8 per cent seen last year,” he told *The Hindu*, stressing that industrial production remained stagnant.

The IIP data assumes significance coming on the back of other indicators—such as the Index of Eight Core Industries and the Manufacturing Purchasing Managers' Index—also showing a pick-up in manufacturing activity.

The Reserve Bank of India recently cut interest rates by 25 basis points to spur demand in the economy.

The capital goods segment of the IIP continued to shrink in February for the fourth month in a row, declining 9.8 per cent. Similarly, output from the consumer non-durables sector dipped 4.2 per cent.

The manufacturing segment of the IIP returned to growth in February recording 0.73 per cent, following three months of contraction.

“This clearly shows that there is still very little momentum on capital expenditure and any sustainable increase in investments is still some time away,” Rishi Shah, Economist at Deloitte India, said.

“As has been the case over the past nine months, urban consumption growth has picked up and resulted in increased production of consumer durables.” The ‘food & beverages’ segment in the consumer price index came in at 5.3 per cent in March, down from 5.5 per cent in February and the ‘fuel & light’

segment came in at 3.4 per cent in March compared to 4.6 per cent in February.

“We are still seeing an increase in prices,” Mr. Sabnavis said regarding the consumer price index. “The rate has come down somewhat. But since the rabi harvest starts coming in from March and the Ministry of Agriculture has projected that it will be poorer than normal, we will have to see how inflation moves in the coming months.”

Electricity production, as measured in the IIP, grew by 9.6 per cent in February compared to 6.7 per cent in January



Drought-hit districts to get water from North Maharashtra, Konkan

Apart from Latur, plans also in place to bring water from nearby talukas, says CM Fadnavis

The state government on Tuesday directed collectors across all eight districts in Marathwada to prepare weekly records of water availability and supply, along with alternative plans to provide water to the drought-hit region in the months of April and May. The government is also considering supplying water from coastal Konkan to these districts for the next two months.

Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis on Tuesday said, “Apart from using trains to supply water to Latur, plans are in place to provide water from nearby talukas to districts where the situation is grave.

Wells and other public water sources in villages have been requisitioned by the district collectors to facilitate continuous supply to residents.”

Gram sabhas have been told not to allow lifting of drinking water through wells or ponds for any commercial or agriculture activities in villages badly affected by drought in districts of Latur, Beed, Parbhani, Osmanabad and Jalna, Fadnavis said. Earlier, Water Resources minister Girish Mahajan said, “We are going to adopt flexible norms to release dam waters from North

Maharashtra to meet the requirements of drought-hit Marathwada.” Although North Marathwada is water sufficient owing to the Godavari basin, they have enforced weekly one-day water cut for effective water management, he said.

“Due to poor rainfall, we have problems across Maharashtra. The water levels in dam across the state are a cause for worry.

But we still have adequate water to sustain the requirements in districts of Marathwada,” Mahajan said. He also revealed that the government plans to raise Rs 10,000 to 15,000 crore loans to complete irrigation projects in these districts.

This is apart from the Rs 7,800-crore budget sanctioned by the state to complete 28 critical irrigation projects this year.

Maharashtra’s Drought Zone: Govt looks at counselling to help farmers

The idea to get farmers suffering from depression to get counselling was sparked by a massive survey launched by the state government in October last year.



In the last four months, the survey has identified 2.95 lakh farmers with significant health problems. While Maharashtra reported more than 40 per cent of the total number of farmer suicides in the country last year, and 57 suicide cases have been reported from the state in the three months so far

this year, a few lives may have been saved by counsellors at the state health advice call centre operated from Pune.”

“We received 2,089 calls (from farmers identified to be suffering from depression) between October 2015 and March 31 this year, and 60 were (found) with suicidal tendencies.

Our counsellors had long chats with them and explained what crops can be grown in a drought-prone region that does not require (much) water,” Nirja Banker, coordinator of call centre said.

The idea to get farmers suffering from depression to get counselling was sparked by a massive survey launched by the state government in October last year. In the last four months, the survey has identified 2.95 lakh farmers with significant health problems.

Of them, 4,607 were found suffering from depression, 15,622 had hypertension and another 14,808 were identified with diabetes. A further 1,165 were identified with ischaemic heart disease (a condition that affects the supply of blood to the heart), 1,191 were found to have suffered stroke, 402 had significant renal problems that could require dialysis, and another 82 were identified with cancer.

In all, nearly 4.26 lakh farmers were screened — by more than 19,000 accredited social health activists (ASHA workers), who underwent training in conducting the survey with special questionnaires. They visited homes of 4.75 lakh farmers in 14 drought-prone, high-risk districts of Maharashtra from October 2015” “Ninety per cent of the survey is complete and these findings are now helping us set up a comprehensive farmer health programme,” Dr Sadhana Tayade, Additional Director (mental health), told The Indian Express.

Dr Manish Renghe, Assistant Director (mental health), said that by and large the farmers surveyed are impacted by drought and other agriculture-related issues, and this has led to stress-related health problems. According to official data, 1,690 cases of farmer suicides were reported in 10 states in 2015. Maharashtra reported the maximum — 725 — followed by Punjab (449), Telangana (342), Karnataka (107) and Andhra Pradesh (58).

While the 57 farmers suicide reported so far this year gives indication of the severity of the situation, the alarming drought conditions does not bode well for the state this year.

Marathwada had experienced drought even last year, but the situation was not as bad as this year. In February 2015, average water availability in dams was 27 per cent – this year it is 6.5 per cent. Nearly 35 per cent of the state is in the grip of severe drought conditions this year, and 85 per cent of these villages are in Marathwada, north Maharashtra and Khandesh regions.

Worse, this is the third year in the last four years that the state is staring at a drought. The rising numbers had prompted Maharashtra's health department to set up a mental health scheme, Prerana, in 14 high-risk districts that have faced drought: Aurangabad, Jalna, Parbhani, Hingoli, Latur, Nanded, Akola, Amravati, Washim, Yavatmal, Wardha, Beed, Buldhana and Osmanabad.

The department allocated Rs 7.6 crore towards this special assistance scheme, officials said. About the survey, Dr Tavade said, "We have to screen the data and identify the range of farmers suffering from mild, moderate or severe depression."

While farmers who were in the mild-depression zone were referred to counselors, and ASHAs told to dial the state health advice call centre (104) to get them to counsellors, farmers identified as undergoing severe depression are referred to psychiatrists at district hospitals, Dr Renghe said.

Counselling and advice have helped, Banker claimed, as most farmers are told that they can send their daughters or sons for further programmes in animal husbandry and related agricultural courses. ASHAs were told to ask basic questions such as a farmer household's income, whether he/she had taken a loan, the number of daughters each family had, and then a patient health questionnaire on a scale of 12 to measure the level of stress or anxiety in each household.

PM Modi to launch online agri-market platform on April 14

The launching of e-platform for marketing of agriculture products is part of implementation of the roadmap for doubling income of the farmers by 2022.



In July last year, the Cabinet had approved setting up of an online national agriculture market with a budget of Rs 200 crore.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi will launch this week an online national agricultural products market platform that will integrate 585 wholesale markets across India.

The launching of e-platform for marketing of agriculture products is being done with the aim to provide more options to farmers to sell their products and is part of implementation of the roadmap for doubling income of the farmers by 2022.

“The Prime Minister will launch the e-platform for marketing of agri products on April 14. It will roll out to 200 mandis by September this year,” Agriculture Minister Radha Mohan Singh said here on Tuesday.

In July last year, the Cabinet had approved setting up of an online national agriculture market with a budget of Rs 200 crore. At present, farmers are restricted to selling produce at mandis that charge various taxes.

The online agri-market is expected to give choice to farmers to sell their produce both in physical mandis or online platform. The easy access to sell

online trade is likely to boost their incomes and improve availability, moderating price rise, Singh said. He added that another scheme, Soil Health Card (SHC), is an important scheme of the government, which aims at promoting soil test based and balanced use of fertilisers to enable farmers realise higher yields at lower cost.

Government had announced the scheme in 2014-15 to provide soil health cards to 14 crore farmers. In 2016-17, 360 additional soil test laboratories will be made operational to test major and micro nutrients, the minister said. This will increase the annual analysing capacity of state laboratories from 1.78 crore to 2.14 crore, he added.

“We will give all the 14 crore farmers soil health cards by March 31, 2017,” Singh assured. When asked about the monsoon prospects, Singh said in 2014-15 saw many states affected by drought, which in turn adversely impacted foodgrain production.

“In 2015-16 too drought-like conditions were there, but this time farmers, states and Centre worked together and the foodgrain production was better than 2014-15.

This year the monsoon forecasts are being said to be favourable and if that happens, production will be good,” he added. On the crop insurance scheme, the minister said that information is being provided directly to the farmers through gram panchayats and krishi vigyan kendras on benefits of the crop insurance scheme.

THE HINDU BusinessLine

‘There is a better price realisation for farmers under the UMP’

Karnataka, a front-runner in agricultural market reforms, has implemented the online auction system through a Unified Market Platform (UMP) in over 100 markets over the past two years. UMP has streamlined market functions and has also brought in transparency in price discovery.

Post-market reforms, the farmer's share in the end consumer's rupee has increased, says Manoj Rajan, MD and CEO of Rashtriya e-Market Services Pvt Ltd (REMS), a joint venture between the Government of Karnataka and NCDEX Spot, which has rolled out the UMP under the public private partnership model. Excerpts:



MANOJ RAJAN, MD & CEO, Rashtriya e-Market Services Pvt Ltd

What is the progress in the UMP rollout? By when do you expect all markets to go online?

A total of 105 markets spread across 27 districts had been brought under the UMP as of March 2016. About 42 lakh lots with a value of ₹19,106 crore and a total quantity of 1,863 lakh quintals have been transacted on the platform.

An e-permit system, that facilitates the movement of commodities within the State, has been introduced during the year, replacing the manual permit system. This allows all 157 markets in the State to update their stock and generate e-permits from the UMP. The remaining 52 markets will start transactions during this year.

What kind of an impact has UMP had on the farmers of Karnataka? Have they been able to realise their payments online?

The initial indicators of the reforms process have shown enhanced transparency in the price-discovery mechanism — farmers are getting computerised bills and SMSes indicating the total value of the produce. The increased arrivals in the markets and greater competition from traders within and outside the State have led to more bids per lot in the online bidding process.

Quality and price awareness among farmers has increased. There is a better price realisation for farmers compared to the prices prevailing in earlier years.

Post-reforms, farmers' share in the end consumer's rupee has increased in commodities such as pulses (tur and moong), chillies and copra, among others.

We have started a pilot on making payments directly to the farmer's account in three markets. As a primary step to online payment, the farmer's accounts are to be integrated with the UMP. A State-wide registration drive has started and till now we have 18 lakh farmers on the UMP.

Traders are now moving towards formal banking arrangements wherein they are provided with cash credit accounts. Online payments in other markets will be taken up in a phased manner.

How successful have you been in attracting buyers from outside the State?

Traders from Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra, Kerala, Haryana, West Bengal and Delhi have taken a unified trader licence with us to trade and participate in our online markets. We also have bulk institutional buyers such as ADM, Cargill, ITC, Reliance, Metro Cash & Carry, Godrej Agro, Pepsico India, Max hypermarket, Trinetra Super Retail registered with us.

Have other States shown any interest in the UMP being deployed by REMS in Karnataka?

Yes, many States have approached us and our achievements in agriculture marketing reforms have been recognised at the national level. Karnataka's Unified Agriculture Market model has become a guidepost for other States taking up reforms. As on date, Andhra Pradesh has integrated seven markets on our UMP.

How are you going about creating awareness among farmers to participate in these auctions?

A massive Stakeholder Education Program has been undertaken to create awareness of the benefits of the online markets to all stakeholders, (and to create awareness on) the importance of cleaning and grading produce before offering it to the market, availability of assaying facilities at markets, transparency of transactions on the UMP such as providing a computerised sale receipt and transfer of sale proceeds directly to the farmer's bank account.

This participative farmers' campaign has been initiated to cover 11,000 villages through 1,100 clusters to reach 2.5 million farmers.

What is the kind of increase in the value of transactions traded through this platform?

The value of commodities traded through the UMP has almost doubled to ₹12,597 crore in 2015-16 from ₹6,509 crore in 2014-15. However, the volumes transacted through the platform have registered a seven-fold increase to around 1,639 lakh quintals.

The e-marketing set-up was supposed to bring in newer concepts such as assaying (analysing) and grading. Any progress on that front?


We have commenced assaying services in 10 markets to cover a minimum 15 per cent of the arrivals in the market. We are taking adequate steps to publicise the importance of assaying. The results of assaying will be displayed in the UMP.

Assaying will be taken up in other markets in a phased manner. We have also taken up an ambitious programme of installing automated cleaning and grading machinery in our APMC markets, where the farmer's produce will be machine cleaned and packed before sale. The project is planned in 65 markets; we will be implementing this project this year. Warehouse-based sale will be taken up this year.

Orientation centres have been established to have a perpetual information dissemination centre for farmers. Price display boards have been established and basic facilities have been enhanced in the markets. We will also augment warehouse infrastructure.

IMD predicts above normal monsoon

Bright forecast		
Category	Rainfall range (% of LPA*)	Probability (%)
Deficient	< 90	1
Below normal	90-96	5
Normal	96-104	30
Above normal	104-110	34
Excess	>110	30



*LPA: long period average

The India Meteorological Department has projected an above normal monsoon for 2016, spelling good news for farmers and policymakers battling two years of consecutive drought.

“Rainfall in the country as a whole for 2016 South West monsoon (June 1 to September 30) is likely to be above normal by 104 per cent to 110 per cent of the long period average,” IMD Director General LS Rathore said at a press conference on Tuesday.

The chances of below normal or deficit monsoon is very low, he added.

Last year, the country suffered a rainfall deficit of 14 per cent, while in the previous year the shortfall was 12 per cent. The below normal rains were mainly attributed to El Nino, an irregularly occurring series of climatic

changes affecting the equatorial Pacific region, which causes drought conditions in Asia.



A photo of billowing rainclouds gallop over the Vizhinjam coast in south Kerala. The pre-monsoon rain peak has formed about 10 days earlier than normal, an indication of earlier monsoon onset over Kerala

Poor monsoons in the last two years hit India's foodgrain production hard with total output falling to 252.02 million tonnes in 2014-15 crop year (July-June) and an estimated 253.16 million tonne in the ongoing 2015-16 crop year compared to a record 265.04 million tonne in 2013-14 crop year.

Reactions

VANDANA BHARTI, ASSOCIATE VICE PRESIDENT, SMC GLOBAL SECURITIES LTD, NEW DELHI

“This year's rainfall is crucial in bringing down prices of some commodities like pulses. Timely and well-spread rainfall can moderate imports of pulses and edible oils. It will also help in maintaining exports of rice, cotton and sugar.”

ASHOK JAIN, PRESIDENT, BOMBAY SUGAR MERCHANTS ASSOCIATION, MUMBAI

“Good rainfall will help farmers in raising the area under sugarcane for 2017/18 crushing season. It will also improve yields of standing crop, but the shortfall will remain in 2016/17 due to last year's drought.”

(with industry reactions from Reuters)

Pepper continues to stay hot



Spot pepper continued to stay hot on Tuesday on strong demand amid squeezed availability.

There were buyers in Kochi for ungarbled pepper at ₹690 a kg, trade sources said. On the terminal market, 12 tonnes were traded at ₹695-705 a kg.

Spot prices increased by ₹200 a quintal to ₹68,100 (ungarbled) and ₹71,100 (garbled). April contract on the IPSTA stayed steady while May and June went up by ₹1,000 a quintal to ₹70,000 and ₹69,000 respectively.

Export prices also moved up to around \$11,000 a tonne c&f for Europe and \$11,250 for the US.

Groundnut, cotton oil traded flat at higher level

As demand reduced at the higher level, groundnut and cotton oil were traded flat on Tuesday. Traders said that after price constantly went up during last two weeks, buying from stockists and local brands was declined. On the other side, retail demand too was down to almost nil at the current price.

Groundnut oil loose was stood at ₹1,065-1,070 per 10 kg, Jamnagar line teliya tin was quoted ₹1,645-46 per 15 kg. About 2-3 tankers of groundnut oil were traded at the Saurashtra's mills. At the retail market, groundnut oil was traded at ₹1,785-90 per 15 kg new tin.

Because of price rise in cottonseed due to short supply, price of cotton oil also moved up in recent time. After that, demand gone down which hold the cotton oil price at the previous level.

Cotton oil wash stood at ₹625-628 per 10 kg. About 10-15 tankers were traded here. Cotton oil new tin was traded at ₹1,050-1,070 per 15 kg.

Tea output down 7.06%

India's tea production continues to lag behind last year for the second consecutive time.

“Tea Board has now announced the output for February. Our compilation shows that in the two months, India produced 34.89 million kg (mkg) against 37.54 mkg.

This fall of 2.65 mkg marks a decline of 7.06 per cent”, Rajesh Gupta, compiler of annual *Global Tea Digest*, told *BusinessLine*. In the North, estates and factories were closed due to harsh winter conditions reducing harvest.

Overall, the production was 5.58 mkg against 6.43 mkg in January-February 2015. Assam produced 0.03 mkg less to total 1.42 mkg.

West Bengal lost 0.84 mkg to produce 3.99 mkg. In the South, production fell by 1.80 mkg to reach 29.31 mkg.



Tamil Nadu topped the country's production table at 19.74 mkg, while Kerala lost 0.64 mkg to produce 8.77 mkg. *PS SUNDAR*

Weak arrivals put chana on the boil



Despite slack export demand, dollar chana prices in Indore mandis are on the rise on lower crop output and weak arrival with its prices being quoted at ₹9,200-9,600 a quintal (up ₹800 from last week).

Arrival of dollar chana in Indore mandis today declined to 5,000 bags. In container, dollar chana ruled higher despite weak export demand with the 42/44 count at ₹12,000 a quintal; 44/46 count ₹10,600-700; 58/60 count ₹9,600, while the 60/62 count ruled at ₹9,400 respectively.

Chana ruled firm at ₹5,100-50, while chana (desi) was at ₹5,000-50, chana (mausmi) at ₹5,500-5,600, chana (vishal) ₹5,100, Kabuli Bitki at ₹6,600, while Kaktu was quoted at ₹7,000. Chana dal (average) fetched ₹6,200-6,300, chana dal (medium) ₹6,400-6,500, while chana dal (bold) was ₹6,600-6,800. *Our Correspondent*

Chana set to surge on record imports, output concern



Prices of agricultural commodities tend to fall during peak arrivals. However, the price of chana (chickpea/Bengal gram), the lone pulse traded on the futures, started rising in February.

Chana prices have jumped more than 24 per cent to ₹5,060 a quintal from ₹4,060 levels.

Earlier in the season, chana prices were under pressure due to reports of good sowing coupled with a higher production forecast on better climatic conditions in chana growing States.

Moreover, sufficient imports, anti-hoarding measures and stock limits are exerting pressure on prices.

Record imports

In December 2015, import duty on chana was extended by the Centre to ensure to ensure availability during the sowing season. According to the latest government data, the country has imported over 9.13 lakh tonnes (lt) of the pulse during the April-January period of 2015-16 – 152 per cent more than the corresponding period last year.

In 2015-16, chana imports touched a record high, surpassing the previous record of 7 lt in 2012-13. Moreover, imports in December 2015 and January 2016 were more than 5.37 lt — again a record for a consecutive two-month period.

During the current marketing year, more than 71 per cent or 6.5 lt of chana was imported from Australia followed by 1.65 lt from Russia. Tanzania, Ethiopia, Myanmar and Canada are the other countries that shipped chana to India. This rise in imports failed to check the price, as the imports were expensive due to the 6.2 per cent depreciation of the rupee against the dollar between October 2015 and February 2016.

Chickpea prices in Australia touched new highs this year due to high demand from India as dry weather threatened production for the second successive year. Prices are reported to have touched more than A\$1,100 a tonne and are expected to average A\$870 a tonne in 2015-16.

The government, in its Second Advance Estimates for production of major crops, in February 2016, estimated the output of chana at 8.09 lt – 10 per cent higher compared to last season on a larger sowing area and better climatic conditions.

However, in March, rains accompanied by strong winds and hailstorms across North and North-West India have flattened chickpea and other crops while there are also reports of damage in Maharashtra. Thus, trade sources are expecting a 15-20 per cent dip in production.

Price outlook

Recently, chana prices moved up on fear of lower-than-expected production coupled with high domestic demand from the food industry.

Moreover, procurement by the Centre for buffer stocks added to the bullish trend in chana. Thus, we expect the prices to touch a record ₹5,425 a quintal, as seen in November 2015.

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THE ECONOMIC TIMES

Government sees better agricultural output this year on hopes of good monsoon



NEW DELHI: The country's farm production is likely to be better in 2016-17 with forecast of above normal monsoon after two consecutive years of drought, Agriculture Minister Radha Mohan Singh said today.

The Met office today predicted that there will be 'above normal' monsoon this year, easing fears over farm and economic growth.

"As per IMD forecast, definitely agriculture production will be better in 2016-17," Agriculture Minister Radha Mohan Singh said on the sidelines of a national kharif conference here.

"We had deficient monsoon last two years. There was 12 per cent deficient rains in 2014-15. And the following year, there was 14 per cent deficiency. But we were better prepared. State governments also cooperated and results were there all to see," he added.

India's foodgrain production declined to 252.02 million tonnes in 2014-15 crop year (July-June) from the record 265.04 million tonnes in the previous year, due to poor monsoon.

The output is estimated to rise slightly to 253.16 in the ongoing 2015-16 crop year as the country received 14 per cent less rains.

Two consecutive bad monsoons have led to farm distress and water scarcity in the country.

Stating that possibility of above normal monsoon would bring big relief to farmers, Agriculture Secretary Shobhana K Patnaik said, "Agriculture is still monsoon dependent. Good rainfall means good production. The coming Kharif season will be good."

There is high stress due to two consecutive years of drought and timely onset of monsoon will encourage timely sowing of kharif (summer) crops from June, Patnaik said.

"We hope agriculture production to be better than this year. We are fully geared for the kharif sowing. States have been asked to make advance preparation to ensure sufficient supply of all inputs like seeds," Patnaik told PTI on the sidelines of the conference.

Sharing that the government has chalked out a strategy to boost pulses and oilseeds output in the kharif season, the secretary said, "Two-thirds of pulses production comes from the rabi (winter) season and one-third from kharif season. The states are fully prepared to take up pulses in a big way."

Similarly, state governments have been asked to increase area under oilseeds and ensure sufficient supply of seeds and support system to farmers, he

added.

The country is making efforts to become self-sufficient in pulses and oilseeds production, and reduce import dependency.

PM Narendra Modi to launch online agri-market platform on April 14



PM Modi will launch this week an online national agricultural products market platform that will integrate 585 wholesale markets across India.

NEW DELHI: Prime Minister Narendra Modi will launch this week an online national agricultural products market platform that will integrate 585 wholesale markets across India.

The launching of e-platform for marketing of agriculture products is being done with the aim to provide more options to farmers to sell their produce and is part of implementation of the roadmap for doubling income of the farmers by 2022.

"The Prime Minister will launch the e-platform for marketing of agri products on April 14. It will roll out to 200 mandis by September this year," Agriculture Minister Radha Mohan Singh said here today.

In July last year, the Cabinet had approved setting up of an online national agriculture market with a budget of Rs 200 crore.

At present, farmers are restricted to selling produce at mandis that charge various taxes. The online agri-market is expected to give choice to farmers to sell their produce both in physical mandis or online platform.

The easy access to sell online trade is likely to boost their incomes and improve availability, moderating price rise, Singh said.

He added that another scheme, Soil Health Card (SHC), is an important scheme of the government, which aims at promoting soil test based and balanced use of fertilisers to enable farmers realise higher yields at lower cost.

Government had announced the scheme in 2014-15 to provide soil health cards to 14 crore farmers.

In 2016-17, 360 additional soil test laboratories will be made operational to test major and micro nutrients, the minister said.

This will increase the annual analysing capacity of state laboratories from 1.78 crore to 2.14 crore, he added.

"We will give all the 14 crore farmers soil health cards by March 31, 2017," Singh assured.

When asked about the monsoon prospects, Singh said in 2014-15 saw many states affected by drought, which in turn adversely impacted foodgrain production.

"In 2015-16 too drought-like conditions were there, but this time farmers, states and Centre worked together and the foodgrain production was better than 2014-15. This year the monsoon forecasts are being said to be favourable and if that happens, production will be good," he added.

On the crop insurance scheme, the minister said that information is being provided directly to the farmers through gram panchayats and Krishi Vigyan Kendras on benefits of the crop insurance scheme.