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THE HINDU

KVASU to get international funding for dairy projects

The Kerala Veterinary and Animal Sciences University (KVASU) has been selected as one of the institutions to get Worldwide Universities Sustainability Fund to strengthen and accelerate the development of major initiatives under sustainable agriculture.

The project titled ‘Global farm platform — towards sustainable ruminant production’ has been accepted under the Worldwide Universities Network (WUN) sustainability fund. KVASU is the only institution selected from the country and it would get nearly £5.7 million under the project initially, said T.P. Sethumadhavan, project coordinator and Director of Entrepreneurship, KVASU.

Besides KVASU, other universities such as University of Alberta (Canada), University of Leeds (UK), University of Sydney, University of Western Australia (Australia), Zhejiang University (China), Kansas State University, Penn State University, University of Wisconsin (USA) and Bahir Dar University (Ethiopia) have been selected for the project.

KVASU has been identified for the project towards dairy stabiliser for the tropics and feed intake. A significant proportion of grazing animals utilise feed resources poorly so they fail to meet market specifications and thus reduce profitability. These unproductive animals have a disproportionate environmental impact because they have low productivity, Dr. Sethumadhavan said.

The key aim of the project is to standardise protocols for collection of individual feed intake records on young, growing cattle and on grass land production systems. Target funders of the project include the Gates Foundation, Wellcome Trust, Stabilizer, International Development Research Centre, Genome Canada, Innovate Agritech Canada.

The project includes international workshops at Malawi, Alberta and India in the areas of advanced ruminant feed intake, genetics and ruminant methane emissions. WUN sustainability grant will be essential to maintain functionality of network and envisages genetic improvement in dairy cattle for tropics.

The project will recognise and emphasise the role of women in livestock rearing and smallholder livelihoods. “At a time when women self help groups are actively involved in dairying, this project assumes more significance for Kerala,” said Dr. Sethumadhavan.

KVASU is the only institution selected from the country, will get nearly £5.7 million for project

Farmers to benefit from sessions at tech expo

Making farmers aware of the latest technology available for the improvement of farm production and cost-effective cultivation, the Technology Week-2016 observance will begin at Peruvannamoozhi Krishi Vigyan Kendra (KVK) on February 29.

The programme being organised by the Indian Institute of Spices Research (IISR) with the support of the Agriculture Technology Management Agency (ATMA) will offer a series of training sessions for farmers from the district.

On the first day, the sessions will focus on farmers who have undertaken largescale cultivation of coconut and banana.

Experts

Expert scientists will explain in detail the available farm mechanisation options for large-scale and small-sc

Workshop on mushroom cultivation on Feb.25

A workshop on mushroom cultivation will be conducted on February 25 at Tamil Nadu Agricultural University Information and Training Centre, U – 30, 10th Street, Anna Nagar.

Time: From 9.30 a.m. to 4.30 p.m.

For registration and further details, call 044 - 2626 3484.

ale farmers in the sector.

The scope of improving spices production and paddy cultivation with new technology will be in focus on the second day of the observance at KVK, Peruvannamoozhi. Farmers in the dairy and ornamental fish farming sectors will attend the technological seminar on the third day.

Along with technical sessions on various new techniques and technologies to revolutionise the village farming sectors, experts will also speak on the financial support currently offered by various agencies for farmers.

Schemes of various public sector banks to boost up the farming sector too will be dealt in detail at the sessions.

Special exhibition

According to programme coordinators, a special exhibition will also be in place during the three-day sessions at the Krishi Vigyan Kendra. Interested farmers can register their names on phone or through email request. For details, contact: 0496-2666041 or mail to kvkcalicut@gmail.com.

Organic farming awards

Sulthan Bathery best constituency

Sultan Bathery in Wayanad has been adjudged the best organic farming constituency in the State. Agriculture Minister K.P. Mohanan has announced Rs.10 lakh for the locality. Cherthala, Vamanapuram, Balussery, Guruvayur, Perinthalmanna, Ettumanur, Koothuparambu, and Kanhangad have been awarded consolation prize of Rs.1 lakh each. Thiruvananthapuram municipal corporation has won the first prize for organic farming practices in urban localities. Thrissur has been adjudged second.

Vegetables, milk may run scarce in Capital

If roads don't open today, supply will be hit

Price of potatoes, onions, grapes, apples and spinach may go up.

The ongoing stir by the Jat community is becoming a cause of worry for traders at Delhi's fruit and vegetable markets. The traders fear if the protests continue, it is bound to hit supplies to the Capital. The availability of even milk is likely to be hit with some parts of the city already facing such shortages.

Sunday was a calm day at the mandis in the city as they remain shut and supplies were not hit until Saturday as well. But what lies ahead is quite uncertain as traders claim the impact would be visible from Monday onwards. "We hope the roads are opened by tomorrow as trucks begin to reach the mandis early morning. Unfortunately, majority of these supplies come from Haryana side, so if the protests do not ease, then problems would begin," said Rajender Sharma, member of Azadpur Agricultural Marketing Produce Committee (APMC).

Having hardly any produce of its own, Delhi largely gets fruits and vegetables from other States like Haryana, Punjab, Rajasthan, Maharashtra, and Uttar Pradesh.

The problem being that except from UP, trucks bringing in supplies of essential commodities from other States come to Delhi via Haryana (NH 1, NH 8 and NH 10) which are being blocked by the protestors. Denying reports that wholesale prices of some vegetables have already increased, Mr. Sharma added, “So far, there has been no hike in cost of any fruit or vegetable. The rumours are a bid by retailers to cash in on the Jat protests.”

According to traders at the Azadpur Mandi, the largest fruit and vegetable market in Asia, the items which may take a hit if the roads are not opened include potatoes, cauliflowers, onions, grapes, apples, spinach and so on. “The transporters who are aware of the protests are now avoiding going via Haryana and are now taking an alternate route via Baghpat in Western Uttar Pradesh,” said the trader.

Milk supplies also hit

Areas like Rohini and Pitampura faced shortage of milk supplies on Sunday. One of the largest milk suppliers in Delhi, Mother Dairy Fruit and Vegetable Private Limited, also said that it has begun to face problems because of the crisis.

Sandeep Ghosh, Business Head – Milk section of Mother Dairy said, “We are currently experiencing some consumer supply disruptions in select pockets of Delhi. However, we are taking all corrective measures to ensure that the consumer supplies are normalised by evening today.”

“While in terms of raw milk movement, we are assessing the situation to address any such supply challenges to the incoming milk to our plants,” he added. Operations at Amul's milk plant in Rohtak remained suspended. It has a capacity of 5 lakh litres per day. Kwality Limited said it has stopped milk collection from its chilling centres in Sirsa and Fatehabad.

Hi-tech Aavin milk parlour comes up in Salem

It will function round the clock and market all Aavin products

The newly commissioned hi-tech parlour at the Salem Aavin head office.

A modern hi-tech milk parlour set up at an outlay of Rs. 60 lakh was inaugurated at the Salem District Milk Producers Cooperative Union (Aavin) head office on Steel Plant Road on Sunday.

Edapadi K. Palanisamy, Minister for State Highways and Minor Ports, inaugurated it in the presence of District Collector V. Sampath. The new parlour will function round the clock and will market all Aavin products such as butter, ghee, badam powder, all ice cream varieties, milk, mango juice, milk shake, sweets such as halwa, Mysorepa and soanpapdi.

On the occasion, Mr. Palanisamy said that Salem Aavin was only the second unit to get a hi-tech parlour among the district milk producers union in the State. The Chief Minister recently inaugurated the first hi-tech parlour at Virugambakkam in Chennai.

He said that the new parlour had been set up in a place surrounded by the Government Mohan Kumaramangalam Medical College, and many Central and State Government undertakings, so that it can serve the students and the employees well. A daily sales target of Rs. 15 lakh had been fixed for this parlour, he said and called upon all sections of society to extend their support for achieving the target.

The Minister said that the farmers, who were solely dependent on marketing milk to the societies, would stand to gain a lot, if people patronised the Aavin products.

The Salem District Milk Producers Union is implementing a scheme of giving star status to the outstanding milk cooperative societies which continuously supplied maximum milk to the union and sanction cash incentives to them to motivate its members. As such, ten societies have been given the star status.

The Kumarasamipatti Cooperative Milk Society was given the four star status and an incentive of Rs. 25,000. The second place went to Veppillaipatti Milk Producers Society which was given three star status and an incentive of Rs. 15,000 and the third place to Kamarajnagar society which bagged two star status and an incentive of Rs. 5,000.

Seven more societies were given single star status and an incentive of Rs. 5,000 each.

The Minister handed over the star certificates and the incentive to all the ten societies on the occasion.

S. Soundappan, Mayor, V. Panneerselvam, MP, R. Chinnusamay, Chairman, Salem Aavin, and K. Santhi, General Manager, Aavin, were present.

Season of plenty in Ezhikkara fields

Initiatives taken by the Palliakkal Service Coop Bank have benefited farmers

A polyhouse at Ezhikkara set up by the Palliakkal Service Cooperative Bank.
The pokkali fields and vegetable orchards in Ezhikkara are ringing in abundance thanks to the efforts by the Palliakkal Service Cooperative Bank to make the village self-sufficient in dairy, poultry and vegetable production.

As the organic farming movement takes root across the State, the Palliakkal Cooperative Bank's initiatives have hogged the limelight and earned it a reputation of an institution that stands by the farmers.

The bank's presence can be felt in at least half the number of homes in the village, says bank secretary M. P. Vijayan, who pointed out that it had extended loans to farmers for various activities such as dairying, poultry farming, fish culture and paddy cultivation.

He said the initiatives taken by the bank had resulted in 45 acres being brought under vegetable and banana cultivation ahead of the Vishu festivities. "Our aim is to create a self-reliant community," he said.

Around 80 tonnes of vegetables were produced ahead of the last Onam festivities. It is expected that around 60 tonnes of vegetables would be produced by the farmers under the bank's aegis for the Vishu festivities.

The opening of 'Jaiva Kalavara,' a permanent outlet for organic produce at Edappally, has provided a big marketing channel for the Palliakkal farmers, who get farming loans at 4 per cent interest. If the repayment is done without default, the interest is waived, said Mr. Vijayan, reiterating the bank's commitment to encouraging farming.

The bank also extends low-interest loans for dairying and poultry farming activities as well as fish culture. Paddy cultivators are given loans without any interest.

The poultry farming efforts have borne fruit with around 2,000 eggs being collected from the farmers on a daily basis to be sold through the bank's outlets, said Mr. Vijayan.

The rise in egg production is the result of the bank taking an initiative to distribute 25 layer birds each to 160 farmers.

There are also 25 self-help groups engaged in various activities, ranging from pokkali rice cultivation to aquaculture.

Around 1,000 farmers are directly involved in various activities, Mr. Vijayan added.

68 saplings planted in zoo

The Forest Department has taken up an initiative to plant 68 keystone tree species at the sprawling campus of Arignar Anna Zoological Park in Vandalur.

This exercise is part of a State-wide massive programme in which 68 lakh saplings will be planted. It was recently inaugurated by Chief Minister Jayalalithaa.

Roof garden scheme gets good response

Officials of the Horticulture Department giving away roof gardening kits to the residents during a sale in Tiruchi.— PHOTO: B. VELANKANNI RAJ

The sale of horticultural kit for setting up roof garden in residential and commercial complexes by the Horticulture Department evoked an overwhelming response, with a large number of residents, making a beeline to the sales outlets located at 11 centres across the city.

On the inaugural day on Saturday, all the 1,000-odd kits were sold out and the department had been making special efforts to despatch additional kits to these centres so as to ensure that residents would get it on Sunday.

Called ‘Do it yourself’, the plan is implemented as part of Urban Horticultural Development Programme.

The kit contains seeds for seven horticultural plants, seedlings for four others besides fertilizers, neem based pesticide, and organic fungicide, said P. Tamil Kangiam, Deputy Director of Horticulture.

He visited a few sales units in the city on Friday and ascertained the response and demand from the customers.

The seeds contained greens (arakeerai, mulakeerai, avarai, bindi, mullangi, palakeerai and coriander) while the seedlings comprised brinjal, tomato, and chillies.

Mr. Tamil Kalangiam said that the sales outlets were located at 11 centres across the city – Uzhavar Sandhai , Srirangam, Periyar Nagar, Abhishekapuram, Karumandapam, Tiruverumbur, BHEL campus, OFT and NIT-T camp.

Those in need of any assistance could contact him by dialling 0431-2423464 during working hours, he added.

Water level at Mettur

The water level at the Mettur Dam stood at 61.14 feet on Sunday against its full reservoir level of 120 feet. The inflow was 132 cusecs and the discharge 1,000 cusecs.

briefly

COTTON AUCTIONED

Cotton was auctioned for Rs. 2.40 crore at the Agricultural Producers Cooperative Society at Konganapuram near here on Saturday. While the DCH variety fetched a price between Rs. 5,700 and Rs. 6,350 per quintal; Surabhi variety fetched a price between Rs. 4,700 and Rs. 5,350 per quintal. A total of 10,000 bags were auctioned for Rs. 2.40 crore.

PROGRAMME

Federation of Indian Export Organisations will organise an outreach programme here on Tuesday (February 23) on Free Trade Agreements. The programme is organised jointly with the Joint Director General of Foreign Trade and EEPC India. Ravi Kapoor, joint secretary, Ministry of Commerce, will take part. For details, contact the FIEO: 0422-2220414.

CENTRE OF EXCELLENCE

KGK-TI and ABK-AOTS will launch a centre for manufacturing excellence here on Monday. The centre will expose Japanese management techniques to small and medium-scale enterprises.

The Indian EXPRESS
JOURNALISM OF COURAGE

Group of Secys recommends promotion of two GM pulses

While it is yet to take a final call on allowing commercial cultivation of genetically modified hybrid mustard, the government appears favourably disposed towards planting of GM pulses.

A Group of Secretaries (GoS) on‘’Farmer Centric Issues in Agriculture and Allied Sectors’ — one of the eight constituted to deliberate on “important themes” following a meeting called by Prime Minister Narendra Modi on December 31 — has recommended “promotion and time-bound deregulation” in the case of two transgenic insect pest-resistant pulses.

The group has also backed the suggestion to set up an Office of Biotechnology Regulations (OBR) to strengthen the regulatory mechanism, even while efforts continue to finalise a fresh legislation to create an independent regulator, the proposed Biotechnology Regulatory Authority of India (BRAI). In the last seven years, three unsuccessful attempts have been made to get the legislation passed in Parliament.

Sources told The Indian Express that efforts to set up this new regulatory division, being modelled on the Office of the Gene Technology Regulator of Australia, are already under way. A Biosafety Risk Assessment Unit has been created and is functional for the last few months.

Earlier this month, the Genetic Engineering Appraisal Committee (GEAC), the existing regulatory body, deferred a decision on allowing cultivation of mustard amid protests by NGOs and activists. The Group of Secretaries has, however, made a "specific proposal" to promote the two GM pulses.

The first one is a GM chickpea (chana) developed by Assam Agricultural University, Jorhat, and licenced to Sungro Seeds Ltd, a sister concern of Jalna-based Maharashtra Hybrid Seeds Company. This transgenic crop, incorporating two genes (Cry1Ac and Cry2Aa) isolated from the Bacillus thuringiensis or Bt soil bacterium, is claimed to be resistant to the pod borer insect pest.

"The technology has shown [a] yield gain of 20-25% in greenhouse trials/field trials by minimising damage by the pod borer. Apart from this yield increase, reduction in cost of chemical pesticides application by 50% would add to the profitability of the farmer," the report of the GoS, headed by Rural Development secretary Jugal Kishore Mohapatra, has said.

The second GM crop is a pigeon-pea (arhar) developed by the International Crops Research Institute for Semi-Arid Tropics (ICRISAT) near Hyderabad. Containing a synthetic Bt Cry1Ab gene, it is resistant to the same legume pod borer, whose larvae feed on both arhar and chana.

The GoS has backed the commercialisation of both these transgenic crops keeping in view India's growing dependence on import of pulses. In 2014-15, the country's pulses imports of 4.58 million tonnes (mt) were valued at $2.79 billion. In the current fiscal, imports have already touched 4.41 mt for the April-December period, entailing a foreign exchange outgo of $2.96 billion.

The GoS report has estimated that the GM chickpea technology can potentially increase domestic production by 2 mt, just as ICRISAT's Bt pigeonpea can reduce imports by another 0.75 mt. India's total pulses production peaked at 19.25 mt in 2013-14, before falling to 17.15 mt in 2014-15 and an estimated 17.33 mt this year.

Supporters of GM technology have cited a similar argument of soaring edible oil imports – over 14.4 mt worth $ 10.5 billion in 2014-15 – for according clearance to the transgenic hybrid mustard developed by the Centre for Genetic Manipulation of Crop Plants at Delhi University.

In another recommendation, the GoS has proposed the establishment of Crop Genetic Enhancement Network (CG Net) to access global knowledge in integrated molecular research and advanced breeding practices and use these to improve productivity of crops. The important crops to be targeted by the CG Net initially would include black gram, green gram, mustard, groundnuts, pigeon pea, chickpea, finger millet, wheat and rice.

Business Standard

No consensus among states on use of GM tech

Consensus seems to have eluded a NITI Aayog task force on agriculture on use of genetically modified (GM) technology in pulses and oilseeds from state governments. However, state governments have broadly agreed to most other issues raised by the task force, including legalising land lease.

Officials said the task force, which concluded its final meeting with representatives from northern, eastern and northeast states last week, is likely to put down all suggestions and issues flagged by the states in the form of actionable points to be implemented.

The task force was constituted in March 2015 by the NITI Aayog to operationalise the decisions taken in the first meeting of NITI Aayog's governing council in February last year. "The final report is expected to be put in the public domain by the end of this month," the officials said.

The task force had floated a discussion paper in December on issues concerning the country's agriculture sector wherein it had recommended calibrated use of the Essential Commodities Act to ensure private investment in storage and warehousing is not hurt. It had also advocated the need for creating a vibrant land lease market and starting a land bank to be held by a private agency.

Later, it held extensive consultations with representatives of state governments. The meetings were held in Ahmedabad, Bengalaru and Delhi.

NITI Aayog vice-chairman Arvind Panagariya presided over these meetings. According to officials, state governments were represented by senior officials and agriculture ministers.

On GM crops, the discussion paper floated by the task force has favoured selective use of transgenic seed varieties, commonly known as GM technology in pulses and oilseeds after necessary safeguards.

It is here that states don't have a common stand, officials said. Officials said NITI Aayog would frame a model land lease Act and it states could either adopt it in full or amend the law according to their local needs and requirements.

"The basic structure might remain the same, but states would be free to adopt the Act according to their needs. For example, in Bihar, remnants of the old zamindari system is still in place and special changes have to be made." NITI Aayog members Bibek Debroy and Ramesh Chand along with economist Ashok Gulati and a host of secretaries from the ministries of agriculture, land resources, water resources, and fertilisers are the other members of the task force.

Officials said that apart from the model land leasing Act, the states also seem to unanimous in their resolve to improve marketing of agriculture products.

"During our interaction, no state opposed amending the APMC (Agricultural Produce Market Committee) Act, which will also get a push. On crop insurance products, the paper said the government should provide a diverse set of insurance products."

THE TIMES OF INDIA

Farmers to be feted at World Culture Fest

Ranchi: Two farmers from Namkom block have been shortlisted for 'Shree Shree Shrestha Krishi' award for their pioneering work in organic farming in Jharkhand. The award will be given during the three-day World Culture Festival 2016 which is being organized to mark 35th anniversary of The Art of Living foundation in Delhi from March 11. Over 34 lakh delegates from 155 countries are expected to converge in the national capital for the festival.

Jharkhand will be represented by 5,000 delegates from Jharkhand, including Governor Droupadi Murmu, state ministers Saryu Rai, Randhir Singh. The state has also decided to send special team of Chhau dancers and 66 tribal music artistes selected from all across the state.tnn

The list of invitees include world leaders like former United Nations secretary general Boutros Boutros Ghali, Sri Lankan president Maithripala Sirisena, Afghanistan CEO Abdullah Abdullah, US congressman Tim Ryan, former prime minister of Pakistan Yousuf Gilani among others. The leaders will be having numerous discussion for promoting peace and harmony in the the world. President Pranab Mukherjee will be the chief guest for the closing ceremony on March 13.

THE HINDU BusinessLine

Crop insurance is too returns-oriented

Farmers' incomes are too inadequate for actuarial premium rates to work for them

End of days Without the right kind of intervention in agriculture KK Mustafah

The farm crisis in India continues unabated, proving all the governmental nostrums ineffective. Unfortunately, the new crop insurance scheme — the Pradhan Mantri Fasal Bima Yojana (PMFBY) — recently cleared by the Union Cabinet, to be implemented from the kharif crop cycle beginning this June, too, is unlikely to bring in any significant relief to farmers, even as it increases the government's spend multifold.

Prima facie , the PMFBY, which replaces the existing two schemes, the National Agricultural Insurance Scheme (NAIS) and the Modified National Agricultural Insurance Scheme (MNAIS), is very attractive. Farmers in India will get full insurance benefit whenever they sustain crop loss on account of natural calamities and against a uniform and heavily subsidised premium such as 2 per cent for kharif, 1.5 per cent for all rabi crops, and 5 per cent in the case of annual commercial and horticultural crops.

Attractive business

The balance between the actual premium charged by the insurance companies and that paid by farmers is met by the government, no matter how big the gap; it could be even 90 per cent, as asserted by the government. Insurance companies can fix their own rates without a ceiling to avoid any loss. That means the new crop insurance is going to be an attractive business. No more will there be a capping on the insurable sum. The scheme also envisages using technology, including smartphones, to capture and upload data of crop cutting to reduce delays in claim payment to farmers, and remote sensing to reduce the number of crop cutting experiments. Besides the Agricultural Insurance Company of India, 10 private companies have been empanelled to participate in the scheme.

A closer scrutiny of the details shows that the benefit to the farmer isn't commensurate with the cost to the exchequer. The Central and State governments are going to give premium subsidy in equal proportion upfront — the estimated combined expenditure is Rs. 17,500 crore a year — whereas the insurance companies are allowed to fix their own rates of premium taking into account costs, risks and margins.

The framers of the scheme don't seem to have understood that the insurance protection by itself is not going to address the biggest problem — farmers' poor incomes.

Surveys and studies have affirmed that the incomes of farmers are unsustainably low. The NSSO 70th round, for instance, shows that those operating on less than a hectare — that's 70 per cent of farmers — are earning much less than their minimum consumption expenditure. In fact, the Socio-Economic and Caste Census 2011 has stated that the per capita earning of the main members of 75 per cent of all rural households is less than Rs. 5,000 per month. So, making the insurance business sustainable with actuarial premium rates is not going to help raise farmers' incomes. Another anomaly of the scheme is that the unit of insurance is going to continue to be 'area-based' — village/village panchayat for major crops and the area above that level for other crops. Individual farmers suffering losses are not going to benefit unless the entire area gets affected.

Insufficient reach

There is also the issue of penetration. According to reports and the government's own claims, only 25 per cent of the cropped area of 194.40 million ha has been covered under the insurance scheme so far; the goal now is to extend it to 50 per cent in three years. The NSS report of its 70th round survey says, "a very small segment of agricultural households insured their crops against possible crop loss"; for instance, 95.2 per cent paddy farmers in 2012 and 96.1 per cent of them in 2013 did not insure. So also in the case of wheat farmers: 95.3 per cent of them in 2012 and 95.9 per cent in 2013 did not insure their crops.

The PMFBY appeared shortly after the RBI-appointed committee on medium-term path on financial inclusion had a suggestion for phasing out the agricultural interest subvention scheme and ploughing the subsidy amount into a universal crop insurance scheme, which means a likely increase in the cost of farming.

The Centre should, therefore, re-examine this insurance scheme and all other farm policies and revise them in such a way as to cut the costs of farmers' inputs, raise their revenue and thereby increase their income. It cannot afford to allow the agriculture sector — the principal source of food and employment in the country — to be controlled by so-called 'market forces'.

The writer is an independent researcher

India Post rides e-commerce wave as villagers turn online shoppers

Aims to cut ₹5,500 cr deficit, improve profitability of 1.4 lakh rural post offices

With his rickety bicycle and sackcloth mail bag, 62-year-old postman Chet Ram does not look like a worker at the vanguard of an e-commerce revolution delivering everything from mobile phones to cow manure.

He pedals miles each day in rural Rajasthan, ferrying packages and taking payments in cash because most of his customers do not have bank accounts, let alone credit cards.

The dawn of online shopping is changing the lives of people in rural areas — and is breathing new life into the ailing India Post, which has struggled with a huge deficit for years.

In the past two years the 160-year-old postal giant has tied up with 400 e-commerce companies, including Amazon and Flipkart to deliver a range of goods.

It deploys its vast network of about 460,000 employees across 155,000 post offices to take goods to customers in remote areas.

Government clerk Surinder Singh Yadav from rural Ula Hedi village in Neemrana district says the dawn of e-commerce has transformed shopping for his family, who now nudge him to order products they see advertised on television.

“These companies give us a variety we don’t get in our local markets, quality at competitive rates and a doorstep delivery,” said Yadav, as he accepted delivery of a spray paint machine.

India Post, founded under colonial rule in 1854, hopes the huge growth of e-commerce will enable it to reverse its financial situation.

The value of cash-on-delivery parcels handled by the postal department is expected to register a 300 percent increase by the end of this financial year compared with last year, India Post said.

It hopes to slash its $800 million (about ₹5,500 crore) average annual deficit and improve profitability at its 140,000 rural post offices.

Online commerce

The absence of reliable private delivery companies outside the big cities led India Post to step in to fill the gap.

“Until recently, people in these rural areas had aspirations but no means to access the market,” Kavery Banerjee, secretary of India Post, told AFP. “Now we are delivering women’s clothes and electronic gadgets even in remote regions like Leh and Ladakh,” she added.

It has been a huge success, with parcel deliveries increasing 15-fold to 75,000 daily deliveries in the past two years.

But the rural terrain, where roads can be poor and infrastructure patchy, poses challenges. Most small post offices, like the one in Neemrana, depend on unreliable public transport to collect parcels from the region’s bigger post offices. Many rural people are new to the Internet and wary of e-commerce, preferring to hand over money only after receiving the goods.

Part of the firms’ success has been driven by giving customers the chance to pay cash on delivery — although it takes up to two days to find out if a parcel was accepted by a distant recipient.

“It has given a sense of empowerment to customers,” said KC Verma, an assistant superintendent at a post office in Behror, near Neemrana. One such customer is Sudesh Yadav, a farmer’s wife in Daulat Singh Pura village in Neemrana who refused to accept her parcel of a car cleaning kit.

“The company has sent the order almost a week late,” she told the postman who had cycled to her home on a cold January morning. “We have already purchased it from a nearby town. Take it back,” she said.

When climate change effects hang heavily in the air

It’s time to promote the idea of public environmental health

Climate change is a global challenge that does not respect national borders. Everyone is affected by climate change, but some are more vulnerable than the others. Children, elderly people, and those with pre-existing infirmities or medical conditions are worse affected.

A World Health Organisation assessment concluded that climate change is expected to cause approximately 250,000 additional deaths per year between 2030 and 2050 — 38,000 due to heat exposure in elderly people, 48,000 due to diarrhoea, 60,000 due to malaria and 95,000 due to childhood malnutrition.

Not surprising then, that the importance of climate change is recognised in all international forums such as the UN Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio 20+) and the Road to Dignity by 2030, the synthesis report by the UN Secretary General in December 2014.

This has been further reaffirmed in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG). In fact, entry 13 of SDG calls for urgent action to combat climate change and its impact. And the main suggested actions relate to strengthening resilience and adaptive capacity; integrating climate change measures into national policies, strategies and planning, and increasing awareness on climate change mitigation, adaptation, impact reduction and early warning.

The significance of such action increases since climate change affects health directly and indirectly -- extreme high air temperatures contribute to increased deaths from cardiovascular and respiratory diseases, particularly in elderly populations.

Weather related natural disasters, rising sea levels and increasingly extreme weather conditions destroy homes, health facilities and essential services leading to a range of health effects, including higher incidence of mental disorders and communicable diseases. Variable rainfall patterns affect food production and supply of fresh water leading to risk of water-borne diseases as also change in vector breeding patterns.

India impact

Information on the impact of climate change on health in India is rather limited although there is some data on malaria burden. There is evidence of increasing malaria prevalence throughout India (NVBDCP, 2007). This stems partially from economic activities and in part from climate change; recent models predict the spread of malaria into new regions in the 2050s and 2080s.

Another noticeable trend is that the Indian annual mean temperature showed significant warming of 0.51 degree C per 100 year, during 1901–2007, mainly due to accelerated warming observed in the recent period, 1998–2007.

Globally, there have been numerous efforts to address the adverse impact of climate change. In 2015, the WHO Executive Board endorsed a new action plan on climate change and health. The historic COP 21 has succeeded in including “Health” in the Preamble of the Paris Agreement, inviting parties to give due consideration to the right to health while dealing with climate change.

In 2008, India formulated its first National Action Plan on Climate Change (NAPCC), outlining the existing and future policies and programmes for addressing climate change mitigation and adaptation. The national environment and health strategy and action plan are being developed by a group of experts.

Climate change and its effect on health are clearly recognised and the two are inexorably linked. All the stakeholders should come together to mitigate the impact of climate change and more importantly seize the moment for a sustainable future.

There is also the need to strengthen health infrastructure to make them climate resilient so that services are not affected due to disasters. As part of the health sector ecosystem, we also need to play a key role in reducing our own ecological footprint as we promote public environmental health.

(The writer is the World Health Organisation's Representative to India. Views expressed are personal.)

THE FINANCIAL EXPRESS

Union Budget 2016: Govt may hike price stabilisation fund by 80 pct to Rs 900 crore

Union Budget 2016: Government is likely to increase the allocation for the Price Stabilisation Fund (PSF) by 80 per cent to Rs 900 crore in the Budget for 2016-17 in a bid to protect consumers from price rise in essential food items.

The PSF, announced in the previous Budget with a corpus of Rs 500 crore, was initially being handled by the Agriculture Ministry.

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Since the purpose of the PSF was to protect consumers, the fund was recently shifted to the Consumer Affairs Ministry, which will monitor it from April 1.

“The plan allocation for the Consumer Affairs Ministry is expected to cross Rs 1,000 crore in the 2016-17 fiscal with the shifting of PSF here. The allocation for PSF itself is likely to increase to Rs 900 crore from Rs 500 crore last year,” a source said.

The PSF corpus would be used for conducting various programmes to protect consumers from price rise and other consumer welfare activities, they added.

The fund would continue to be used this year for importing pulses as the output is expected to be lower at 17.33 million tonnes against the demand of 22-23 million tonnes. Already, state-owned MMTC has floated two tur dal import tenders.

The fund will continue to be utilised for procurement of pulses for creating buffer stock, which will be offloaded in the market to curb price rise. Already, more than 35,000 tonnes of pulses has been procured by FCI and other agencies from kharif crop. The procurement of rabi pulses will also begin shortly.

Controlling the pulse of pulses

While long-term solution will rely on increasing production, an outlay of a mere Rs 700 crore in the Union Budget can start restructuring the pulses sector

States may be given incentives for producing more pulses. Pulses fix atmospheric nitrogen in their roots and the following crop after pulses requires less of nitrogenous fertiliser. Growing pulses, thus, can help save fertiliser subsidy costs. Pulses also contribute in improving carbon content of the soil and raise productivity for the subsequent crop.

The rising and highly volatile prices of pulses are seriously affecting the budget of households, and pose a major challenge to the government to bring down prices and sustain them at manageable levels. In fact, the problem of high and variable prices of pulses has become perpetual for nearly a decade. The economics of this phenomenon is simple. The domestic production of pulses is unable to meet the demand consistently, leading to the spiral of price increases every year.

To fill in the demand-supply gap, imports of pulses has indeed expanded, and in value terms now belong to the billion-dollar club. Yet, given that few countries in the world produce pulses and India has a very large deficit across several varieties of the crop, the ability of imports to cool markets has been limited. India has struggled to import required quantities at reasonable prices.

Although the share of pulses in total value of agricultural output is only 5%, making it seem like a fringe crop, yet their rising prices have tended to create a political storm in the country. Since India is the biggest producer, consumer and importer of pulses in the world, an effective pulses strategy that results in significantly increased availability of the crop at affordable and stable prices is the need of the hour. The upcoming Union Budget is an opportune moment to start addressing the problems holding the pulses sector back. We propose a five-point package that we believe can increase the production of pulses and stabilise their prices.

One lakh pulses villages

Pulses are often grown in rain-fed areas having low yields, and are prone to several diseases and pests. The average yield of pulses is less than 800 kg per hectare. Due to subsequent droughts, production from a peak of 19.27 million tonnes in 2013-14 is expected to dip to 17.2 million tonnes in 2015-16. Notwithstanding the erratic climate pattern, raising productivity from the currently very low level should be the first step. Farm scientists claim the availability of high-yielding, disease-resistant and drought-escaping varieties for cultivation. To spread the improved varieties, the 60,000 pulses village programme may be expanded to 1 lakh villages for field-level demonstrations (at least five in one village, at the rate of Rs 3,500 per demonstration) by allocating a sum of Rs 175 crore.

Restructured pulses seed sector

Unlike crops such as maize, the pulses seed sector in India is weak; it is reflected in a strikingly low rate of seed replacement between 2% and 4%. A three-pronged strategy is needed to pull up the pulses seed sector.
One, the rate of innovation needs to get on a springboard by involving the private sector (conspicuous by its absence). This could take the form of a pull system of research of the type Kremer suggested for an HIV AIDS vaccine, albeit with much lesser value of award in this case. Essentially, the system would work as follows. If the traits that are desired are delivered by an innovation, the winners would get a big reward, but transfer the intellectual property rights to the government. The private sector, so far, has not come forward in pulses seed business due to its tiny scale and the public-sector seed companies are also wary for exactly the same reason. Overall, the playing field should be level between the private and the public sectors, including the NGOs, in terms of being eligible for the big reward if they deliver in terms of desired traits in this technology.

Two, there is an urgent need to expand the area under existing improved varieties and also increase the seed replacement rate. NGOs which are working at the ground level can be incentivised to produce and market improved varieties of pulses seed. To begin with, an allocation of Rs 400 crore may be made for producing and marketing about 20,000 tonnes of improved seeds by engaging NGOs in selected clusters.

Three, a system of seed certification should be developed such that better seeds get adopted and receive higher value, thereby encouraging innovation.

Promote farmer producer organisations

The Small Farmers' Agribusiness Consortium (SFAC) is promoting farmer producer organisations (FPOs) to make smallholder agriculture remunerative through "farming together, growing together". Commodity-specific FPOs are coming up for production, processing, marketing, retailing and export. Although some FPOs already deal in pulses, incentives may be given to form more and larger FPOs for production, processing and marketing of pulses. FPOs can play an important role in production, branding and linking with organised retail and processing. Incentives may be given to pulses FPOs for procuring machines for sorting, processing and packaging. A sum of Rs 5 crore may be allocated for incentivising or subsidising FPOs for credit, machines, etc, to develop the value chain for pulses.

Incentives to states

States may be given incentives for producing more pulses. Pulses fix atmospheric nitrogen in their roots. The following crop after pulses requires less of nitrogenous fertiliser (15-20%), and can thus help in saving costs of fertiliser subsidy. Pulses also contribute in improving carbon content of the soil and raise productivity for the subsequent crop. Therefore, states may be incentivised for these environmental services contributed by pulses. Any one or more states contributing, say, 1 million tonnes or more from the base year of 2014-15 may be given an incentive towards environmental services and saving in subsidies for nitrogenous fertilisers. A notional amount of Rs 20 crore may be allocated for giving incentives to two or three states.

Strategic reserves

The government may consider having a strategic reserve for at least two pulses crops, namely gram and tur. In the event of expected shortfall in supply and rising prices, strategic reserves may be used to release these pulses crops in the open market to control prices. For an efficient reserves management, it should be combined with price monitoring and early warning systems. By design, the reserves should be large enough to deter hoarding, but should not be excessive such that they become a fiscal burden. It can have a cooling effect on prices till the imports come in. In the long run, a strategic reserve of about 50,000 tonnes may be developed, which may be replaced on a regular basis. However, to begin with, a sum of Rs 100 crore may be provided in the Budget to build a reserve of about 10,000 tonnes for 2016-17.

A sum of Rs 700 crore will be needed to meet these proposed interventions. However, the long-term solution will rely on increasing production. India must target increasing production of pulses not only for domestic market, but also for meeting the growing global demand for pulses. This crop is the future food both for the developed world and many developing African countries. There are projections that global pulses consumption may grow by 10% in the coming decade and 23% by 2030. India has agro-ecology to grow different pulses crops in different seasons, but needs incentives and institutions. A small amount of R700 crore, which is a mere 1.3% of the total value of pulses production, will be the most important gift to the crop's producers and consumers in the International Year of Pulses 2016.

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