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Government to focus on access to social security for unorganised labour: Jaitley



Mechanisms can be thought of wherein social security benefit contributions to workers can be made by employers at a single window for all workers, says the Finance Minister.

He said that the key challenges faced by Indian agriculture are the need to increase productivity by leveraging technology.

Finance Minister, Arun Jaitley, said the government's priority was to ensure access to health and social security benefits to three labour groups—organised, unorganised and those not employed or below the poverty line.

Addressing labour unions and farmers' associations in two separate meetings on Monday, Mr. Jaitley said, "To make health and social security benefits accessible to unorganised sector workers like construction workers, migrant labourers, volunteers of different schemes like Anganwadi workers etc is one of the major priorities of the present government. "Mechanisms can be thought of wherein social security benefit contributions to workers can be made by employers at a single window for all workers," the Minister said. "The minimum wage should not be less than Rs.18,000 per month. Need-based minimum wage is to be considered as essential part of social security," the central trade unions had said in their recommendations.

“The income tax ceiling for the salaried persons and pensioners should be raised to Rs.five lakh per annum and fringe benefits like housing, medical and educational facilities and running allowances in Railways should be exempted from the income tax net in totality,” the unions added. The unions also recommended that contract or casual workers should not be deployed in jobs of a perennial nature. These workers should be paid the same wages and benefits as was being paid to regular workers doing the same work until they are regularised. In addition, the trade unions called for a control on spiralling prices and putting an end to government’s divestment in public sector companies.

Mr. Jaitley, addressing farmers, offered some solutions for the poor performance of the agricultural sector over the last few years.

“The key challenges faced by Indian agriculture are the need to increase productivity by leveraging technology, especially for high yielding and pest-resistant seeds and efficient utilisation of water, adopting the latest in IT to increase resilience to nature by phasing sowing, watering and harvesting and to increase the price benefits to the farmer by providing timely market information,” Mr Jaitley said.

Prolonged dry weather may hit wheat yield

Unless it rains in the next 7 to 10 days, the wheat crop in the country’s north-west and central grain growing States could suffer a reduction in the yield and poor quality due to the ongoing prolonged spell of unusual dry and warm weather.

Temperatures have been hovering a little above normal in wheat growing areas. However, agriculture experts say there is nothing to worry at this stage but a dip in temperature and rain in next few days would be helpful for the crop as it is in the vegetative stage.

“Wheat crop is in a critical stage. It’s been a long dry spell coupled with unusual warm winters. If there are no rains in the next 7 to 10 days, wheat yield will suffer adversely,” senior agriculture expert and Punjab State Farmers Commission adviser P.S Rangi told *The Hindu* , pointing out that the quality of grain would also deteriorate in the absence of timely rain.

He said rain in the next few days followed by sunshine would assist in proper photosynthesis process, otherwise the quality of wheat could stay poor.

“There have been negligible rains since September in the wheat growing States and hence, there is more moisture stress in central India, mainly in Madhya Pradesh, parts of Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan,” said J.S. Sandhu, Deputy Director-General (Crop Science), at the Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR), adding that rain in next few days were crucial for the crop.

SGB to set up branches in Krishna, Chittoor

The Saptagiri Grameena Bank (SGB), sponsored by the Indian Bank, is going to open as many as 11 new branches in the rural sector in the Chittoor and the Krishna districts by March 2016, with a view to strengthen the rural banking network and to move closer to the rural customers, particularly farmers.

Addressing a press conference in Chittoor, SGB chairman B. Suribabu said that the total deposits of the bank by December 2015 stood at Rs. 3,567 crores, while making a total business of Rs. 6,985 crores. “By opening new branches, we will be covering over 600 villages, in addition to setting up of more number of farmers’ clubs,” the official said.

Mr Suribabu said that so far the SGB had disbursed agriculture loans to the tune of Rs. 1,277 crores.

The SGB chairman said that to improve the customer-base, interest rates for MSME and housing loans were reduced. The official said that thanks to the bank’s effective campaign, over 1.5 lakh people were enrolled under the PM Jeevan Jyothi Bhima Yojana and Suraksha Bhima Yojana schemes.

Need to address challenges in farm sector, says Siraj Hussain

Agriculture Secretary says climate change, yield gap, imbalance in crop production affecting GDP

Union Secretary for Agriculture, Cooperation and Farmers’ Welfare Siraj Hussain on Monday called upon the young agriculture scientists to address

three key issues in an agrarian country like India. “Climate change, yield gap in major crops and imbalance in crop production are affecting the GDP,” he added.

Speaking at the convocation of Acharya N.G. Ranga Agriculture University in Rajamahendravaram on Monday, he said that climate change would have significant negative impact and yield may fall by 4.5 to 9 per cent depending on the magnitude and distribution of warmth.

“This loss in yield roughly translates to about 1.5 per cent of the GDP per year,” he stressed.

He said that though India ranked first in production of pulses, still there was a gap between production and consumption and the Union government was concentrating on promoting rabi pulses through crop development programmes like the National Food Security Mission.

He appealed to young minds to provide innovative solution to marketing of agriculture produce so that farmers can get a decent return on investment made in high value agriculture.

After the address, the Vice-Chancellor on behalf of Chancellor of the University presented honorary doctorate to Mr. Hussain which was read out by R. Veeraraghavaiah, Dean, Faculty of P.G. Studies. Registrar T.V. Satyanaryana presided over the function and, other doctorates and degrees were presented by Mr. Hussain.

‘Officials told to convince farmers’

Ministers Kimidi Mrunalini and Ganta Srinivasa Rao have called upon the officials concerned to impress upon the farmers of Bhogapuram to voluntarily part with their lands for the development of the Bhogapuram International Airport instead of going for forcible acquisition.

At a review meeting with Collectors MM Nayak (Vizianagaram) and N. Yuvaraj, Nellimarla MLA Pathiwada Narayana Swamy and MPP Bangarraj, the Ministers said Chief Minister N. Chandrababu Naidu was keen on development of the State despite a deficit budget. They said that farmers had voluntarily given up their land for construction of the capital at Amaravati.

They asked the officials to hold discussions with the farmers in a congenial atmosphere and bring out a comprehensive report within two months. Later addressing the media, Mr. Srinivasa Rao said a decision was taken to acquire 5,311 acres for the airport. Of this 3,685 acres was private land of which 3,387 acres was agricultural land.

Banks now encourage joint liability groups

Joint liability groups enjoy have good track record of prompt repayment

After promoting the women's self-help groups, banks are now focussing on promoting joint liability group mostly comprising men farmers and livestock owners.

The fact that Rs. 8 crore sanctioned by the Thuraiyur branch of Indian Bank about three years ago, had been repaid without any overdue testifies to the success of the joint liability group.

The principle of joint liability group has gone down well with not only the borrowers but also the bank officials.

“It has cleared a myth that men often turn defaulters. Given some assured economic activity, men groups in the form of JLGs can prove their mettle,” said S. Suresh Kumar, Assistant General Manager, National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development (NABARD).

“An initiative on a small measure by NABARD taken in 2012 to promote 25 JLG for dairy activity in Thuraiyur area in the district has been registering its success,” he said. In this context, he underlined the role of non-governmental organisations in motivating farmers to constitute the JLGs.

“We conducted periodical sessions and imparted training to members before floating the JLG,” says K.K. Marimuthu, Managing Trustee of Shalom Foundation, which has been coordinating with the JLGs in ensuring prompt utilisation of loans and its cent per cent recovery.

About 400 JLGs had been floated in the Thuraiyur belt with a credit flow totalling Rs. 8 crore. “Not even a single case of overdue has been reported among the JLGs,” says the bank official.

The smaller strength of JLGs ranging between 4 and 10 members per group has been a facilitating factor for the bank officials in persuading farmers to take to micro activity allied with agriculture.

He said the Thuraiyur model had proved that men groups too are prompt in repayment of loan.

Banks in Thuraiyur have been vying with one another in sanctioning credit to the JLGs.

Apart from Indian Bank, a few other banks, including the Karur Vysya Bank and Indian Overseas Bank, have been sanctioning the credit for setting up dairy units.

Felix Edward, Branch Manager, Indian Bank, Thuraiyur, says the JLG has been facilitating the banks for promoting bank's products and implementing the Prime Minister's social security scheme.

The JLG member is considered so trust-worthy that his recommendation for fresh borrowers was given due weightage, he added.

Micro credit

400 JLGs have been floated in Thuraiyur block with Rs. 8 cr. credit flow

NABARD started it by floating 25 JLGs in 2012

Not even one case of default has been reported

Sugar mill served notice for deducting transport charges for cane procurement

Revenue authorities have sought a written explanation from a private sugar mill based in Sathyamangalam regarding a complaint from cane farmers that transportation charges were being deducted from the statutory Fair and Remunerative Price (FRP) of Rs. 2,300 per tonne fixed by the Central Government.

A written explanation was asked for through a notice as the mill authorities have not replied to an oral instruction for allaying the apprehension of farmers. Late last month, the sugar mill was already under instruction from

the District Revenue Officer told to pay Rs. 2,300 per tonne in full to the farmers in the wake of an impasse over the preparedness of the industry to pay only Rs. 1,900 per tonne.

The District Revenue Officer, R. Satheesh. who held a tripartite meeting involving the mill officials and farmers' representatives gave them 15 days to comply with the FRP norms, to avoid legal action. But, the mill did not give any commitment to that effect, it is learnt.

Subsequently, the farmers had reportedly been informed by the mill that Rs. 92.80 per tonne would be deducted towards transport from the procurement cost.

The mill had reportedly justified its act reasoning out that the levy of transport charge was inevitable beyond a 10 km radius. Farmers are not prepared to buy this line of thinking. Having sought and obtained an extension of the command area, the onus was on the mill to meet the entire transport cost from the farm to the crushing centre, Subi Thalopathy, representative of Thadapalli-Arakankottai Ayacut Farmers' Association said. Agriculture Department sources said the mill had made a partial settlement of dues to farmers, a few days back. Both the private mills in the district, the other based at Aapakodal, have come under severe criticism from farmers for refusing to pay the State Advisory Price. In addition to the FRP, the State Government had fixed Rs. 350, inclusive of Rs. 100 towards transport, as the SAP.

The farmers are incensed since the mills have not only failed to pay the SAP along with the FRP, but are also attempting to accentuate losses to farmers by deducting the transport charges out of FRP.

Farmers have been complaining that both the private mills have not factored in the revenue generated from sale of by-products: ethanol and power.

Sugar mills are expected to settle dues to cultivators within 14 days of procuring the last load from their farms. Beyond that, the mills would be required to pay interest of 15 per cent on the outstanding amount.

But, farmers in the district have been waiting for months together to receive their outstanding amounts, leave alone the interest component.

The mill had made partial settlement of dues to

farmers, a few

days back

Kochi to host national organic meet

The first national summit on organic agriculture will be held at the Adlux Convention Centre near Angamaly on January 7 and 8.

“The summit will be attended by officials and farmers from all the States in the country,” said a senior official of the State Department of Agriculture.

“Minister for Agriculture K.P. Mohanan will inaugurate the summit and Union Minister of State for Agriculture Sanjeev Kumar Balyan will be the chief guest on the second day,” said the official.

The summit will be a platform for farmers, farm scientists and officials to interact and exchange ideas. The first day will be the ATMA-SAMETI summit where directors of Agricultural Technology Management Agencies and State Agricultural Management and Extension Training Institutes from 12 States will present papers.

The second day will see panel discussions on organic agriculture as well as interactions among scientists, farmers and officials from different States.

The summit will be an occasion for Kerala to showcase its achievements as it moves towards comprehensive organic agriculture. The State has set the target of conversion to organic agriculture in 2016.

Vegetable production

Meanwhile, a recent estimate by the Department of Agriculture shows that vegetable production in the State has risen to 15,32,384 tonnes from 90,533 hectares during the current year.

“This is an increase of 3,42,328 tonnes and 15,213 hectares from the previous year,” said an official of the Department. The figures do not include backyard, terrace or growbag vegetables production.

Palakkad in the lead

Palakkad leads the districts in the State in vegetable production with the district accounting for 3,015 hectares under vegetables, and production of 42,084 tonnes.

The Department has been distributing growbags under various schemes and through various agencies.

Under one scheme, 25 growbags are sold at Rs.1,500 with a subsidy. A total of 36,075 units were distributed during 2014-15. During the current financial year, a total of 31,714 units have been distributed, the official said.

A platform for farmers, farm scientists and officials to interact and exchange ideas

CPCRI centenary fete from next month

It has released 19 high-yielding varieties of coconut

The Kayamkulam research station of the Central Plantation Crops Research Institute (CPCRI) of the Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR) is celebrating its centenary this year.

The year-long celebrations would begin in February, ICAR-CPCRI Director P. Chowdappa said at a press conference here on Monday.

Mr. Chowdappa said the CPCRI focused on research in coconut, areca nut, and cocoa. The organisation was contributing Rs.19,000 million annually to the exchequer by way of benefits accrued from improved productivity arising out of advanced research.

Nineteen improved high-yielding varieties of coconut, including six hybrids, were released for various quality and quantity traits. These varieties and

hybrids have the potential to yield two to six times more than the locally grown varieties in different coconut growing regions.

Ten improved varieties of areca nut were released including two dwarf hybrids. In the case of cocoa, seven high-yielding varieties including three elite clones and four hybrids which yield up to 2.5 kg of dry beans per tree, were released.

The CPCRI was established in 1916 as Central Coconut Research Station. It was taken over by the ICAR, which formed the CPCRI in 1970 by merging the coconut research stations in Kasaragod and Kayamkulam as well as Central Areca nut Research Station, Vittal, and five substations at Palode and Kannara in Kerala, Hirehalli in Karnataka, Mohitnagar in West Bengal, and Kahikuchi in Assam.

There are two Krishi Vignan Kendras, one at Kasaragod and the other at Kayamkulam, under the CPCRI.

The All India Coordinated Coconut and Arecanut Improvement Project (AICCAIP) started functioning from 1972 at the CPCRI, Kasaragod, and later renamed as All India Coordinated Research Project on Palms (AICRP) in 1986.

The AICRP has 13 centres on coconut, six on oil palm, and two on palmyrah.

CPCRI focuses on research in coconut, areca nut, and cocoa

It is contributing Rs.19,000 million annually to the exchequer

Minister seeks more allocation for modernising fishing harbours



K. Abhaychandra Jain, Minister of State for Fisheries and Sports and Youth Services, addressing a workshop in Mangaluruon Monday.— Photo: H.S. Manjunath

Minister of State for Fisheries, Youth Empowerment and Sports K. Abhayachandra Jain on Monday urged the Union Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers Welfare to make more budgetary allocation for the modernisation and development of fishing harbours in the State.

Addressing a gathering after inaugurating a two-day workshop on the “use of space technology in fisheries” here, he said that more funds should be allocated to the State for constructing breakwaters in select areas, as well as near fishing harbours, for preventing sea erosion.

Mr. Jain said that the State government gave subsidised diesel worth Rs. 100 crore to fishermen every year. In addition, it gave Rs. 1.20 lakh to poor fishermen every year as assistance for building houses.

Department of Animal Husbandry, Dairying and Fisheries, Union Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers’ Welfare is organising the workshop.

The objective of the workshop is to explore the possibility of adopting space technology in fisheries to promote the use of space applications by various stakeholders. The government has proposed to develop an action plan to adopt space technology in the fisheries sector for the benefit of fishermen.

Space technology is useful in the fisheries sector for identification of potential fishing zones in sea, accurate weather forecast for fishermen and for measurement of area of aquatic resources for fish culture.

With the adoption of these technologies, the operational cost of fishing boats is expected to reduce, resulting in higher profit for fishermen. Accurate weather forecast will help in the safety of fishermen in sea.

Ashok Kumar Anugurana, Secretary, Union Department of Animal Husbandry, Dairying and Fisheries, said that the workshop would deliberate upon preparing an action plan for making the benefits of space technology reach fishermen.

Aditya Kumar Joshi, Joint Secretary of the Union Department of Animal Husbandry, Dairying and Fisheries, spoke.

N.S. Channappa Gowda, Secretary, State Department of Animal Husbandry and Fisheries, welcomed the gathering.

Manju defends hike in milk prices

Minister for Animal Husbandry and Sericulture A. Manju has defended the increase in milk price. “Considering the plight of milk producers and their unions, the State government has approved the hike in milk prices,” he said at a press conference here on Monday.

The milk prices prevailing in Karnataka were less than those in neighbouring States. Even after the upward revision, the milk prices in Karnataka remained less than those ruling in other States. “The decision to increase milk prices has been taken in the interest of the State’s agricultural sector, although it has hurt consumers a little. I appeal to the public to purchase Nandini products to strengthen the Karnataka Milk Federation and help milk producers,” he said.

Chief Minister Siddaramaiah would visit Hassan on Thursday to inaugurate many schemes, including the inauguration of the veterinary college, medical college building and a few others. “The State government will pay equal attention to all developmental works related to Hassan. However, the third phase of drinking water project for Hassan, widening of important roads and completion of ring road are high on the agenda,” he said.

ENGAGEMENTS

National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development: State Credit Seminar: Chief Minister Oommen Chandy releases State Focus Paper 2016-17, Hilton Garden Inn, 10 a.m.

Kerala Institute of Labour and Employment: Minister for Labour Shibu Baby John inaugurates workshop for newly elected heads of civic bodies, Hotel Hycinth, 10 a.m.

University of Kerala: Professor of Biostatistics, University of North Carolina and Chapel Hill C.M. Suchindran delivers Professor R.

Ramakumar memorial lecture on 'Research designs in demography,' Senate Chamber, 11 a.m.

Department of Animal Husbandry: Minister for Agriculture K.P. Mohanan inaugurates mobile tele-veterinary unit, C-DAC, Vellayambalam, 11.30 a.m.

Department of Agriculture: Minister for Agriculture K.P. Mohanan felicitates woman entrepreneur, Uchakkada, 5 p.m

Local Self Government Department: Chief Minister Oommen Chandy inaugurates State-level information dissemination programme, Tagore Theatre, 4 p.m.

Education Department: Deputy Speaker Palode Ravi inaugurates four-day district level school festival, Government Boys Higher Secondary School, 4.30 p.m.

DC Books: Philipose Mar Chrysostom Mar Thoma Valiya Metropolitan releases book titled *Christianikal* , Press Club, 4. 30 p.m.

Malayinkeezhu panchayat: Chief Minister Oommen Chandy inaugurates new building for Government ITI and lays foundation for Arts and Science College, Malayinkeezhu, 5 p.m.

Akhila India Samadhana Aikyadhardya Samithi: Public confluence, Secretariat, 5 p.m.

Soorya Festival: 'Smrithiarang,' YMCA, 6 p.m.

Kerala State Social Welfare Board: Minister for Social Welfare M.K. Muneer distributes Women Excellency Award, Mascot Hotel, 11 a.m.

NSS: Education Minister P.K. Abdu Rabb and Health Minister V.S. Sivakumar distribute NSS awards, VJT Hall, 2.30 p.m.

Release of water from Mettur dam to continue



The release of water from Mettur Dam for farm activities will continue for 15 more days. —PHOTO: E. LAKSHMI NARAYANAN

Even while further stepping up the release of water from Mettur dam for the farm activities in the delta region on Sunday evening, the Public Works Department has also extended the release of water in the dam's East-West Canal for saving the standing crop in the western districts of Salem, Namakkal and Erode till January 18.

The release of water from the dam into Cauvery river which stood at 12,000 cusecs for the past few days, was stepped up to 15,000 cusecs on Sunday evening for the ongoing 'samba' cultivation in the delta region.

This is fourth time in the last 13 days that water release from Mettur dam has been stepped up for samba cultivation.

The PWD, on demands of the farmers of Cauvery delta districts, stepped up the water release to 7,000 cusecs on December 23. It further stepped up the release to 9,000 cusecs and 12,000 in the subsequent days following good water position in the dam. The water from Mettur Dam was released in to the East-West Canal for irrigation activities in 45,000 acres in Salem (16,433 acres), Namakkal (11,337 acres) and Erode (17,230 acres) districts on August 20.

PWD sources said that usually water would be released for farm activities under the East-West Canal scheme for 137 days from August 1 to December 15. Since the water storage position in the dam was not adequate enough, the release of water was deferred to August 20. The 137 deadline ended on

Sunday (January 3). About six tmc of water had been released under the canal scheme.

Initially about 500 cusecs was released from the dam in the first phase and it was later stepped up based on the need for farm activities.

“Rains damaged banana crop on 3,048 hectares in Tuticorin”

Banana crops were damaged on 3,048 hectares in parts of Tuticorin district after rains during the northeast monsoon season, Collector M. Ravikumar said here on Monday while referring to assessments carried out by officials.

The officials were still ascertaining damage caused to other crops and a report was expected to be submitted in two days, he said.

Apart from banana, crops such as chillies, onion, black gram, green gram, maize and paddy were also damaged in the rains. The State government had already announced compensation for crop damage.

As for damages caused to irrigated banana crop, compensation of Rs.13,500 was fixed per hectare and Rs.7,410 as compensation for damage caused to a hectare of rain-fed crop. As per inspection by officials, 21,100 houses in district were inundated during the monsoon season, the Collector told the media.

Surpassing the average annual rainfall of 662 mm, Mr. Ravikumar said the district experienced 804.6 mm rain in 2015.

He said NABARD had sanctioned Rs.1.23 crore under its rural infrastructure development fund to construct a check-dam across Karumeniyar at Kombankulam in Sathankulam taluk. The check-dam would have a 70 meter width and height of one meter, the Collector said, adding that 4,01,449 free dhotis and saris would be distributed to consumers through fair price shops ahead of Pongal.

Tourism Minister S.P. Shunmuganathan inaugurated the distribution of dhotis and saris during last week at Sathankulam and so far, 20,546 such items had been given.

As for as freebies such as grinders, mixers and electric fans were concerned, the government allotted a total of 95,655 sets of these items for distribution during 2015-16 and 25,327 beneficiaries had been covered so far.

Tuticorin Sub-Collector S. Gopala Sundara Raj and others were present.

‘TN floods claimed 470 lives, over 3.83 lakh hectare crops damaged’

Tamil Nadu Chief Minister Jayalalithaa expressed hope the Centre will release the "required" assistance based on the Inter-Ministerial officials report.

Tamil Nadu Chief Minister Jayalalithaa on Monday said the “unprecedented” northeast monsoon has killed 470 people and nearly a lakh livestock besides damaging crops in over 3.83 lakh hectares in the State.



Detailing the large-scale destruction caused by heavy rains in four phases during October-December 2015, Ms. Jayalalithaa recalled her demand for a central assistance of Rs 25,912.45 crore for the relief and restoration works.

Noting that the Central team of Inter-Ministerial officials, which earlier assessed the damage caused in the first three phases of rains, will visit the State again from Tuesday for a similar exercise, she expressed hope the Centre will release the “required” assistance based on its report.

“During the northeast monsoon period between October 1 and 27, as many as 49 persons died. 421 persons died of various reasons, including drowning, electrocution, lightning strike and wall collapse between October 28 and December 31, 2015,” the Chief Minister said in a statement.

The government had provided relief of Rs four lakh each to families of 245 victims and the rest will be covered in the coming days, she said.

Over 3.47 lakh hectares of agricultural crops and 35,471 hectares of horticultural crops have suffered damage, she said, adding 68,350 farmers had been compensated with Rs 29.48 crore. The rest will be covered soon, she said.

A total of 30.42 lakh families had suffered partial or complete damage to their dwelling units, including huts, with the government completing the survey of 14 lakh families in this connection, the Chief Minister said.

Ms. Jayalalithaa gave away the relief amount to five persons on Monday to mark the launch of the efforts and the cash assistance for the identified 14 lakh families will be deposited on Monday itself in their bank accounts, she said adding the rest will be covered by January 11.

As far as livestock were concerned, about 98,000 cattle, poultry, goats and pigs had perished during the monsoon and a compensation of Rs 7.78 crore has been disbursed so far, she said, adding Rs 12.82 crore has been provided for loss sustained by fishing community, which includes boats.

Blast disease threatens ‘Andhra Ponni’ crop

Farmers blame fog for triggering the blast disease in Tiruchi district



Farmers who came to the Collector's Office in Tiruchi on Monday, showing the Andhra Ponni paddy damaged by blast disease.— PHOTO: B. VELANKANNI RAJ

A group of farmers from parts of the district have complained that the blast disease has caused serious loss to the standing “Andhra Ponni” or “BPT 5204” variety this ‘samba’ season.

Led by A. Nagarajan, State president of the Farmers Wing of the Tamil Maanila Congress, they made a representation to the District Collector here on Monday.

They carried samples of the damaged paddy. He said farmers relied more on ‘BPT 5204’ variety as it ensured immediate marketability with good price.

Water supply

E. Ramadas, a farmer from Tiruverumbur, said the timely supply of water for irrigation prompted him to raise ‘BPT 5204’ on three acres of land, incurring an expenditure of Rs. 25,000 an acre. He anticipated 40 bags an acre which could be marketed for Rs.40,000 at the rate of Rs. 1,000 a bag.

“But, the blast disease has destroyed the crop,” he said.

S.K. Selvaraj, district general secretary of the Tamil Maanila Congress, said the sudden fall in temperature had triggered blast disease because of fog in ‘Margazhi’ month.

Mr. Nagarajan and C. Masilamani, district secretary of the Tamil Nadu Vivasayigal Sangam, explained the damage to K.S. Palanisamy, District Collector. They said that although the tillers had grown without grains inside.

Farmers, who had come from Kalkandarkottai, Alathur Nathamadipatti, Mudukkupatti, Mullaikudi, Pappakurichi, Sarkarpalayam, and Poygaikudi, wanted a compensation of Rs. 25,000 an acre.

Officials told to prepare proper DPRs for rural infra projects

Loan being given to the State government by Rural Infrastructure Development Fund (RIDF) of the NABARD is the cheapest, NABARD General Manager L Munda said.

Addressing officials from implementing departments of the State government from the four North Andhra districts here on Monday, he urged the officials to realise that RIDF project was a source of savings for the State.

The proposals sent by implementing agencies at the district level would be cleared by the high-powered committee at the State-level headed by the Chief Secretary, he added.

One of the most important issues that cropped up during the reviews was data inconsistency, the status reports at the State-level were found to be different from the reports from the ground level, the NABARD GM said.

The RIDF loans have helped states create infrastructure in rural areas, NABARD AGM A.K. Mishra said adding that the RIDF loans are given in three broad categories, agriculture and allied sectors, social sector and rural connectivity.

He advised the officials to flag the issues and problems like land acquisition, forest area and environmental clearance, among others in the DPR to enable the bank to take an informed decision while evaluating the proposal.

The officials should exercise caution while preparing the DPRs and include details like the exact location of the project to help field inspection, he added. RIDF is demand based and not a general allocation, he said.

The bank officials from the regional office Kalyansundaram and Sanjay Joglekar explained issues involved in preparation of DPRs and the grounds for rejection of the proposals. They said what expenses could be included and which were not eligible. During an interaction they clarified the doubts of the officials.

AGM Visakhapatnam district K.V.S.S.L.V. Prasada Rao, superintendent engineers, DEs and other officials from different departments from Srikakulam, Vizianagaram, Visakhapatnam and East Godavari districts, attended the review meeting.

Plea to increase support price of copra

Coconut farmers are keenly looking for government intervention to get the support price for copra increased as the diminishing market prices pose a severe threat to the profit margins.

Raising the matter at the grievances redress meeting organised by the district administration for farmers here, C. Manoharan, the district secretary of Tamil Nadu Farmers Association, said that the market price for copra had come down from Rs. 110 a kg to almost Rs. 56 a kg in the last one year.

“Hoarding by traders and import of palm oil in large quantities can be cited as some of the reasons for the fall in prices,” he said.

K.C.M. Balasubramanian, another farmer, said that apart from increasing the support prices, steps should be taken to distribute coconut oil through public distribution system so as to boost up the demand for coconut.

The farmers who attended the meeting requested the District Collector to allot a bus stop in front of the new Collectorate building to provide an easy access.

Earlier, Collector G. Govindaraj distributed modern tractors and rotavators to 10 farmers at subsidised rates in an attempt to enthuse them to use latest technologies.

Farmers advised to form groups to avoid exploitation

To avoid exploitation by middlemen, there is a need to form farmer groups.

Each one of such groups can get a subsidy of Rs. 6 lakh to boost cultivation of spices such as pepper and cardamom that are in demand in foreign countries, B.M. Jayaram, Director of Spice Board, Sakleshpur, told a seminar at the Taluk Market Society Hall here. The seminar was organised under the auspices of the Spice Board of India and the Taluk Marketing Society, Sirsi.

Farmer groups with a minimum of 25 members, which number can go up to a maximum of 100, should register themselves under the law governing charitable institutions and submit such registration to the Spice Board.

Carbonated fruit juices



In a first, carbonated fruit juices of grape, apple, and pomegranate have been developed by the CFTRI. Union Minister Harsh Vardhan launched the juices standardised by the institute with each one of them containing 20 per cent fruit extracts.

This new process can possibly help the country towards 'Yellow Revolution' since Prime Minister Narendra Modi has asked multinationals to mix their carbonated drinks with fruit juices to help farmers.

India processed only 2.2 per cent of its total fruit production, which is far less compared to the U.S. (65 per cent), Philippines (78 per cent) and China (23 per cent).

Almost 35 per cent of fruits and vegetables are wasted because of lack of processing and storage capabilities, according to the institute. The research outcome on carbonated drinks at CFTRI gains significance as the consumer market for soft drinks is growing at 30 per cent annually with a whopping Rs. 25,000 crore.

Plea to lift ban on fishing sea cucumber

"Ban deprived the livelihood of scores of fishermen"

The Tamil Nadu AITUC Meenava Thozhilalar Sangam has appealed to the district administration to help to lift the ban on fishing sea cucumber, an

endangered species listed under schedule I of the Wildlife Protection Act, 1972.

S. Muruganandam, sangam district secretary, who led a group of members, who visited the Collectorate here on Monday, wearing masks used for underwater fishing, questioned the logic behind India imposing the ban when the collection of the organisms for commercial exploitation was allowed in more than 100 countries in the world.

The ban, since 2001 in the Palk Strait and the Gulf of Mannar, has deprived the livelihood of scores of fishermen in the region but their counterparts in Sri Lanka, across the Strait, were freely fishing sea cucumber, which commanded good demand in the export market, he said.

In the absence of an effective monitoring mechanism, the ban has not yielded the desired result as fishermen continued to engage in illegal fishing of the endangered species to eke out a living, he said. However, the poor fishermen faced stringent legal action when they were caught by forest officials.

Lifting of the ban would provide steady income to hundreds of fishermen living along the coast of the Palk Strait and the Gulf of Mannar, he said. The lifting of ban would also help the fishermen get better price for the catch as they were forced to sell the organisms at throw away price to illegal traders and exporters, said Mr. Muruganandam.

Scientists from the Central Marine Fisheries Research Institute (CMFRI) while addressing a “Consultation meet on sea cucumber” in August last, expressed views that sea cucumber played a key role in preserving the ecosystem and acted as good bio-terminators.

Mr. Muruganandam said the CMFRI and the authorities had suggested a seasonal ban on fishing sea cucumber in the Palk Strait and the Gulf of Mannar, but no decision was taken even after several years.

Special gram sabha on January 12

Special gram sabha will be held at 11 a.m. on January 12 in the following village panchayats to undertake social audit of the work carried out under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme in Thanjavur district. The panchayats are Sakkarasamantham, Kaasanadu

Pudur, Michaelpatti, Nemam, Thiruvaalampoohil, Valappakudi, Aadhanakkottai, Peikarambankottai, Keezhapazhyaru, Araiypadaiveedu, Perumandi, Kallapuliur, Thukkachi, Puthagaram, Kanjanoor, Melakattoor, Echankudi, Manaloor, Neduvasal, Arumalaikottai, Sendankkaadu, T. Maravankadu, Sirankudi, Puliyakudi, Semiyam-madhevipattinam and Sendhalaivayal, according to a release here by District Collector N. Subbaiyan.



FM Arun Jaitley for greater investment in agri sector, incentive revision

Farmers ask government to provide loans of up to Rs 5 lakh at 4 per cent interest.



Finance Minister Arun Jaitley (R) at the pre-budget meeting in New Delhi on Monday. (Source: PTI)

In a pre-budget meeting with agriculture sector representatives on Monday, finance minister Arun Jaitley argued for the need to increase investment in the sector as well to revisit incentives structure for the farmers, as per a finance ministry statement released after the meeting.

He said the agriculture sector needs to increase productivity by leveraging technology, efficient usage of water and adapting to latest information technology to increase resilience.

Jaitley said these issues can be addressed by revisiting incentives of farmers, reducing wastages, enhancing earnings and improving marketing of farm produce.

The agriculture sector has not performed well in three out of the last four years mainly due to inadequate monsoons, he said.

hindustantimes

Forget blackberries, black raspberries are the new superfood



Black raspberries are characterised by a higher content of secondary metabolites, which have been proved beneficial for human health. (Shutterstock)

Black raspberries may be the new superfood on the block as they show greater health benefits than their better known cousins -- raspberries or blackberries, according to a new study. Berries contain potent antioxidants, which decrease or reverse the effects of free radicals -- natural by-products of energy production that can play havoc on the body and that are closely linked with heart disease, cancer, arthritis, stroke or respiratory diseases, researchers said.

It is usually the exotic Goji, Acerola or Acai berries that make the headlines as superfoods, they said. The new study from the University of Agriculture in Krakow in Poland suggests that black raspberries grown in Central Europe show greater health benefits than their better known cousins -- raspberries or blackberries. Researchers led by Anna Malgorzata Kostecka-

Gugala measured the content of phenolics and anthocyanins in black raspberries, red raspberries and blackberries, assessing their antioxidant potential and health benefits.

They were able to confirm that the antioxidant activity of natural products correlates directly with their health promoting properties. It turns out that the amount of antioxidants in black raspberries was three times higher than the other fruits under investigation. The number was even higher for phenolics or the amount of anthocyanines -- with black raspberries topping their humble cousins by over 1000%. But most interestingly, black raspberries seem to be characterised by a higher content of secondary metabolites, which have been proved beneficial for human health. The Central Europe-grown variety of black raspberries showed greater health benefits than raspberries and blackberries, researchers said.

THE HINDU BusinessLine

Oranges hit Kerala pineapple farmers in the eye



Glut in citrus fruit sparks price crash hurting demand for Vazhakulam variety

KOCHI, JANUARY 4:

The sharp fall in the price of oranges and the subsequent glut in the markets from western and northern States has caused the price of 'Vazhakulam' pineapples in Kerala to crash.

The State is one of the largest producers of the tropical fruit in the country. On Monday, ripe pineapple was sold at ₹ 12/kg in Vazhakulam, said to be the largest pineapple market in Asia, and located 50 km east of Kochi.

The special green variety of the Geographic Indication (GI)-tagged Vazhakulam pineapple, which is usually bought by traders and fruit processors from other States, is priced at ₹ 12/kg and the green category at ₹ 11.

Loss-making proposition

The average cost of production of a kg of pineapple is ₹ 17, according to Baby John, a farmer who raises the Vazhakulam variety on leased land in Ernakulam and Kozhikode districts.

This implies that pineapple farmers who have taken loans will face challenges repaying them.

In turn, this should impact the agricultural NPAs of banks.

Monday's prices are a far cry from the record high prices the fruit commanded a little over two years ago. In the May-August 2013 period, the price of a ripe fruit had shot up to ₹ 52, while the special green got a price of up to ₹ 43 a kg.

The prices of these pineapples have been falling for weeks together. Farmers and retailers point out that the main reason is the declining prices of oranges following the heavy continuous arrivals from other States.

Oranges have always been priced high in the Kerala market, but now they are sold at ₹ 25 a kg by street vendors.

John confirmed that the spike in the demand for oranges following its price fall has directly hit the domestic demand for pineapple as well as its price.

Going bananas

He also pointed out that the increased production of pineapples and the fall in the prices of some other fruits such as bananas, had also contributed to the decline in pineapple prices.

John, a former President of the Vazhakulam Pineapple Farmers Association, estimates that there has been a 20 per cent increase in production in the current season (October to January). In the wake of receiving the Geographic Indication tag, the extra-sweet Vazhakulam variety is now extensively cultivated across the State, leading to a surge in production.

Because of the heavy decline in the price of rubber, thousands of small rubber farmers have abandoned rubber cultivation, cut the trees and leased out their lands to pineapple farmers.

This has also contributed to the over production.

John noted that pineapple processors from Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra and other States had in the past year bought some 7,000 tonnes of Vazhakulam.

“But for these buyers, the prices would have nosedived,” he said.

(This article was published on January 4, 2016)

‘Rescue farmers from debt trap’



The Centre and the states should formulate suitable agricultural policies and implement them in earnest to rescue farmers from the debt trap, pleads Dr. Y. Sivaji, an agricultural expert.

GUNTUR, JAN 4:

The Centre and the states should formulate suitable agricultural policies and implement them in earnest to rescue farmers from the debt trap and to save their lives, according to Dr. Y. Sivaji, the former member of the Rajya Sabha.

He made the plea in a representation to Union Finance Minister Arun Jaitley in New Delhi on Monday as a part of the pre-budget consultations being conducted by the Minister. Sivaji, an agricultural expert who resides here, has been participating in pre-budget consultations for several years.

Noting with regret the suicide of 5,650 farmers across the country in 2014, as confirmed by the National Crime Records Bureau, Sivaji said the farmers were forced to take the extreme step as they had fallen into the debt trap and there was no way out for them. "Agriculture in the country is a gamble with monsoon, and the input costs are soaring all the time. Droughts and floods ravage the crops and there is no relief for the farmers," he complained.

The states were washing their hands off by announcing ex-gratia payments to the families of farmers who ended their lives and little was being done to address the problems afflicting the sector.

Suggestions

Stating that the minimum support prices announced by the Centre for various crops were highly unrealistic, he suggested that the states should announce the MSPs and they should be entrusted with the responsibility of ensuring the payment of MSP. Further, the crop insurance policies should be reformulated to see that each farmer who loses crop gets the insurance on an individual basis and not on the basis of crop loss in a particular area.

Further, he suggested, the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme should be implemented in such a way that the farm operations do not get affected for want of labour. The village panchayats should be involved in the exercise.

He pleaded that economic liberalisation should be extended to the farm sector and farmers should be allowed to sell their produce anywhere in the country or abroad. He impressed upon the Union Finance Minister the need for urgent action to address the issues.

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(This article was published on January 4, 2016)

Gujarat sees record tobacco sowing this year

Farmers plant the cash crop on over 1.5 lakh hectares

AHMEDABAD, JANUARY 4:

Chewing tobacco may be harmful for health, but the cash crop has caught the fancy of farmers in Gujarat.

According to the recent Gujarat government data, tobacco sowing in the State has touched one of the highest in recent history exceeding 1,52,000 hectares of area.

Government sources revealed that increase in area the result of attractive returns that tobacco has fetched for the growers.

Higher prices

“In spite of a ban in force for the tobacco products such as gutka, the sowing has increased dramatically this year. The average for last three years is around 103,400 hectares. Last year there was crop damage due to unseasonal rains, which caused prices to surge. This seems to have lured more farmers into tobacco cultivation,” said a senior official from State Agriculture Department.

Tobacco sowing had dipped to 45,700 hectares in 2007-08, which jumped by over three times since then.

According to traders, raw tobacco prices in the State had touched ₹ 2,700 per 20 kg, up almost 100 per cent from what was in the previous year.

“Raw tobacco prices had shot up last year. Gujarat produces mainly *kalkatti* tobacco, which is used for *bidis* and *gutka*. In spite of the ban, *bidis* continue to be sold in the State as is loose tobacco. But with

increased sowing, we feel prices will fall by at least 50 per cent,” said Bakul Patel, a tobacco processor based at Vadod village in Anand district.

Derivatives

Patel further mentioned that finished tobacco prices have been ruling lower at around ₹ 100/kg, which is about 30 per cent lower than previous year.

However, other derivatives such as dust and stem provide good earning opportunity for processors.

“Currently, there is no offtake. So, finished products prices have come down. We get about 12 kg of finished products from 20 kg of raw tobacco. The rest is waste, which includes derivatives,” said Patel.

In Gujarat, districts of Kheda, Anand and Vadodara mainly have cultivation of *bidi* tobacco, while regions like Panchmahal, Dohad, Mehsana, Banaskantha, Gandhinagar and Sabarkantha have cultivation of rustica tobacco, used primarily for chewing.

(This article was published on January 4, 2016)

Biometric cards to fishermen important to extend benefits: Fisheries Secretary

MANGALURU, JAN 4:

A top official from the Union Agriculture Ministry has stressed the need to issue biometric identity cards to the people actively involved in fishing activities across the coastal areas of the country to extend benefits and services.

Inaugurating a national-level workshop on ‘Adoption of Space Technology for Fisheries’ in Mangaluru on Monday, Ashok Kumar Angurana, Secretary, Department of Animal Husbandry, Dairying and Fisheries in the Union Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers’ Welfare, said that fishermen can get benefits of various government schemes and services, if they are issued biometric cards.

Though the country has around 1.4 crore fishermen, 20 lakh of them are actively involved in fishing activities. The three public sector undertakings that have been given the task of issuing biometric cards to fishermen have covered around 13.5 lakh. Still nearly 6.5 lakh fishermen need to be issued such cards, he said.

It is essential for such fishermen to register for suitable linkages, convergences and coordination with various ministries in the State and Central governments and other agencies involved in fisheries sector.

Angurana suggested that three public sector undertakings coordinate with different State governments and union territories along the coast and devise a definite schedule of action to issue biometric cards to the rest of fishermen.

(This article was published on January 4, 2016)

Palm oil to slip initially, rise

January 4, 2016:

Malaysian palm oil futures on the Bursa Malaysia Derivatives ended sharply lower on Monday, on concerns over falling demand. Hopes of demand from China for the upcoming Lunar New Year holiday seems to be fading and resulted in loss of confidence.

CPO active month March futures moved perfectly in line with our expectations. As mentioned earlier, close above important resistance at MYR 2,460/tonne, in needed to take prices towards the psychological resistance zone between 2,500 and 2,510 levels or even higher and prices having found support at lower levels could gradually edge higher and test the psychological level at 2,500 or even higher. The benchmark third month contract fell exactly from the 2,500-10 zone.

More declines towards 2,405 followed by 2,385 levels look likely. Though the decline could continue, the trend still remains bullish and our favoured view expects support levels at 2,385 followed by 2,360-65 could still hold and prices could once again attempt to rise higher.

Only an unexpected decline below 2,340 could hint that the expected rise above 2,500-10 might not materialise. Such a decline could open the downside again targeting MYR 2,300-20/tonne levels or even lower.

Favoured view expects a corrective decline to supports mentioned above and then prices to rise higher again. We will now reassess the wave counts, as prices have crossed over above 2,370-2,400. A possible new impulse looks to have started again. One of our targets at 1,850 was met. The rally from there looks very impressive.

The current move could push higher towards 2,645 initially and then it could correct lower in a corrective pattern towards 2,310 or even lower to 2,250, and then subsequently rise towards a medium to long-term target at 2,900, which could bring this current impulse to an end.

But, this is clearly a medium to long-term expectation and not to be mistaken for a short-term view. Any dips could prove to be opportunity to participate in the upcoming uptrend. RSI is in the neutral zone now indicating that it is neither overbought nor oversold.

As mentioned in the earlier update, the averages in MACD are above the zero line of the indicator hinting a bullish trend to be intact. Only a crossover again below the zero line could hint at a reversal in trend to bearish.

Therefore, look for palm oil futures to correct lower initially and then move higher again.

Supports are at MYR 2,405, 2,375 and 2,345. Resistances are at MYR 2,455, 2,495 and 2,510.

The writer is the Director of Commtrendz Research. There is risk of loss in trading.

(This article was published on January 4, 2016)

Business Standard

Surinder Sud: The amazing maize

Hybrid varieties have spurred growth in the production and productivity of maize. Improvements in the economics of its cultivation bode well for India

Incredible as it may sound, the fact is that [maize](#) has beaten most other food crops, including [wheat](#) and rice, in terms of growth in production and productivity, especially in recent years. Much of this growth is technology-driven although expansion in crop area and better crop management have also contributed to it. Around 65 per cent of the area under maize is now used to cultivate hybrids, including various types of speciality produce such as sweetcorn, popcorn, baby corn and protein-upgraded corn called [quality protein maize](#) (QPM). Growers get higher returns for these types of corn. Improvements in the economics of maize cultivation seem imminent in coming years, thanks to present research strategies to enhance the quality of its protein, raise its beta-carotene (vitamin A) content and impart greater inbuilt resistance to it against diseases and weather-induced stresses such as drought.

The average maize productivity is estimated to have risen by 98 per cent between 1986 and 2014. This is almost double the increase of about 50 per cent in the average yields of wheat and [rice](#) during the same period. Besides, maize farming has spread in recent years to new areas in states such as Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu and Maharashtra. The success in breeding good-quality, high-yielding and disease-tolerant hybrids with better adaptability is believed to have played a significant role in the steady expansion of corn farming. Attempts made in the 1950s to introduce US-bred corn hybrids in India did not succeed as they could not adapt to local conditions. This, in a way, was a blessing in disguise as it spurred indigenous research and led to the development of a large number of good hybrids suited to Indian conditions. The latest breakthrough in this field is the evolution of single-cross hybrids that are becoming popular among farmers. Evolved by crossing two distinctly different parent lines with desirable traits, these hybrids are highly productive. Their seeds are also relatively economical and easier to produce.

Maize has traditionally been grown as a rain-fed crop in the kharif season. But attempts to grow it in the rabi and spring seasons have also proved successful in several areas, notably West Bengal, Bihar and the north-eastern states. "With good agronomic practices, the yield of rabi maize can be double that of kharif maize and can even be as high as 12 to 12.5 tonnes a hectare", according to New Delhi-based Indian Institute of Maize Research

Director O P Yadav. In tracts where winters ends early, ruling out wheat cultivation, or where rabi rice suffers due to water scarcity, maize is emerging as a potential alternative. Many farmers in West Bengal have begun to prefer maize to rice, potato and mustard in the rabi season, and to jute in the kharif season. Similarly, maize is replacing cotton and rice in some parts of Karnataka, and sorghum and cotton in Maharashtra, Yadav points out.

Maize, being a versatile grain, has found several commercial uses now. Consequently, only around 23 per cent of its output is consumed as food; the rest is used as feed for poultry, livestock and fish, or for producing starch and brewery products. The poultry industry alone consumes more than 50 per cent of the maize production. This content may rise further with the availability of maize hybrids that have higher content of lysine and methionine - the two key proteins needed for poultry birds.

Indian maize has managed to get a firm foothold in the export market as well. Between 3.5 and 5 million tonnes of maize have been shipped out annually since 2010, mostly to South-east Asian countries. The availability of speciality corns, notably sweetcorn and baby corn, has opened up European markets for Indian maize. Marketing channels are coming up to dispatch speciality corns to export destinations immediately after harvest to retain their freshness. For example, baby corn grown around Ludhiana in Punjab is reaching Europe within hours of its harvest. With further expansion of such facilities, production and export of special types of maize are bound to swell in the near future.

Budget 2016-17: Agri bodies seek more allocation & soft loans for farmers

The bodies also sought mandatory crop insurance for all crops besides a long term comprehensive export policy for five years

At a time when the agriculture sector is facing distress, Finance Minister [Arun Jaitley](#) on Monday stressed the need for more investment and for revamping the incentive structure for farmers.



“The key challenges faced by Indian agriculture are the need to increase productivity by leveraging technology, especially for high-yielding and resistant variety seeds and efficient utilisation of water; adapt the latest IT to increase resilience to nature by phasing sowing, watering, and harvesting; and to increase the price benefits to the farmer by providing timely market information,” Jaitley said, at a pre-Budget meeting with representatives from agriculture bodies.

Read our full coverage on Union Budget

According to an official statement from the finance ministry, Jaitley said these challenges could be addressed by revisiting the incentive structure of farming, use of latest technology to raise productivity, reduce wastage and enhance earnings as well as to improve marketing of farm produce. He said there was a need for more investment in the agriculture sector.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Representatives from Fertiliser Association of India sought introduction of direct transfer of urea subsidy to farmers and higher budget allocation for the next three years to clear arrears of Rs 50,000 crore
- 11 central trade unions raised demands under a 15-point charter. They have asked for fringe benefits — housing, medical and educational facilities and

running allowances in railways — to be exempt from income tax

The farm sector representatives sought enhanced budgetary allocations in the Union Budget 2016-17 to improve investment in agriculture, irrigation, research and development, and post-harvesting facilities.

The two-and-a-half hour meeting saw the agriculture bodies demanding setting up of national irrigation authority to give thrust to irrigation projects and river valley authorities for distribution of water, levying charges for water supply and suggesting cropping patterns.

The farmer groups also asked the government to provide loans of up to Rs 5 lakh to all farmers at four per cent interest and sought higher support price and consistent export policy.

The agricultural bodies also sought mandatory crop insurance for all crops, besides a long-term comprehensive export policy for five years to be announced to connect Indian farmers with international markets.

Budget 2016-17 is expected to see significant increase in allocation to marquee programmes such as the Pradhan Mantri Krishi Sinchai Yojana, Rashtriya Krishi Vikas Yojana, Pradhan Mantri Gram Sadak Yojana, and the one to provide soil health cards to the country's 140 million farmer families over three years to boost the overall rural economy.

The farm sector also sought exemption of income tax on profit made by farmer producers' organisations and agri-cooperatives, creation of buffer stock of milk powder, outright ban or increase in import duty of butter oil, and imposition of safeguard duty on import of rubber.

Farm bodies also said the government should do away with interest subvention scheme on crop loan and take corrective measures to provide institutional credit to small farmers.

Representatives from various trade unions also gave their representations to the Budget makers. These demands were raised under a 15-point charter submitted by 11 central trade unions.

Jaitley said one of the Modi government's biggest priority was "to make health and social security benefits accessible to un-organised sector workers like construction workers and migrant labourers, and volunteers of different schemes like anganwadi workers etc. Jaitley added the government was considering a mechanism to provide social security benefit contributions to workers under a single window.

The unions have asked that fringe benefits such as housing, medical and educational facilities and running allowances in railways should be exempted from income tax. Unions suggested that public sector units (PSUs) be strengthened and expanded and the disinvestment of government shares in profit-making PSUs be stopped. Besides, they said the budgetary support should be provided for the revival of sick PSUs.

The unions' joint charter said the threshold limit of 20 employees in Employees' Provident Fund scheme be brought down to 10. It said the government and employers' contribution should be increased to allow sustainability of employees' pension scheme and for provision of minimum pension of Rs 3,000 a month.

Industry wants direct payment of fertiliser subsidy to farmers

The fertiliser industry is under tremendous stress due to subsidy arrears

In a pre-Budget meeting with the finance minister, the fertiliser industry today pitched for direct transfer of urea subsidy to farmers and clearance of its arrears, which are pegged at Rs 50,000 crore by the end of the current fiscal.

"We have conveyed to the finance minister that the industry is under tremendous stress due to subsidy arrears. So, the government must allocate an additional Rs 15,000 crore for the next three years towards fertiliser subsidy, pegging the total subsidy at Rs 90,000 crore per year," Fertiliser Association of India DG Satish Chander said.

He was speaking to reporters after the pre-Budget meeting with Finance Minister Arun Jaitley.

Backing direct transfer of fertiliser subsidy to farmers, the industry expressed its willingness to work with the government on this initiative.

"We have told the government that we will capture all data required for direct transfer of subsidy. In fact, we are even ready to synchronise this entire data with the Aadhar card," Iffco MD U S Awasthi said.

Awasthi added that excessive use of urea due its lower retail price is impacting soil health and subsequently farmers, and argued for curbs.

The industry also made a case for decanalisation of urea to allow fertiliser companies to directly import urea as against the current practice where only three canalising agencies import the crop nutrient.

This is "the opportune time" for such a policy change since cost of production of Indian urea is about the same as price of imported urea.

Urea is a controlled commodity and is being sold at Rs 5,360 per tonne, with the difference between cost of production and selling price being taken care of as subsidy to manufacturers.

Subsidy on urea constitutes almost 70% of the total production cost.

India's annual demand for urea is about 30 million tonnes, while domestic production remains stagnant at 22 million tonnes. The rest is met through imports.



GM crop should be properly regulated: Nobel laureate Venkatraman Ramakrishnan

Chandigarh: Nobel laureate Venkatraman Ramakrishnan on Monday said the genetically modified (GM) technology held great potential and benefits for the society.

Ramakrishnan or Venky, as he is popularly known, is on a three-day visit to the Tricity. Talking to TOI at the Indian Institute of Science Education and

Research (IISER) on failure of GM cotton crop in fighting whitefly attack in Punjab and Haryana recently, he said, "The GM is like any other technology and can be both used and misused. People should look at it on case-by-case basis."

He further stated that the technology should be tested properly and the GM crop should be regulated like any other crop. Ramakrishnan added that the government and non-profit organizations can have alternatives to GM crops that are more beneficial.

On research collaborations between India and UK, Ramakrishnan said the Royal Society of London already had a number of things, including Newton fund, that works for many countries like India. "Moreover, we are looking into ways to expand the research collaboration between the two countries," he added.

Ramakrishnan is scheduled to visit Panjab University, PGI and the Institute of Microbial Technology on Tuesday. In PU, he would deliver a lecture on "On nobody's word: Evidence and modern science."

Box: 'Govt should put a check on sale of antibiotics without prescription'

While delivering a lecture on 'Antibiotics and the cell's protein factory' at IISER Mohali on Monday, Professor Venkatraman Ramakrishnan said the government should keep a check on the sale of antibiotics without prescription.

Talking about the misuse of antibiotics, the Nobel laureate said, "It is important to be careful about the use of antibiotics. In India, one can go to any chemist to get an antibiotic without a prescription. Moreover, farmers are giving antibiotics to cattle that is again misuse of antibiotic that can lead to resistance."

"In order to make a profit, a chemist would always want to sell the most expensive antibiotic even if the patient does not require it," said Ramakrishnan. Labeling the issue of misuse of antibiotics as economic and government issue, Ramakrishnan said it was the responsibility of the government to provide good public health and decent medical care for people.

Lack of winter rain a big worry for U'khand farmers

Dehradun/Almora: Scanty rainfall this winter is causing a great deal of worry to thousands of farmers across Uttarakhand. Good winter rain is especially important for farmers in the hills where there are minimal irrigation facilities.

According to Met department sources, the state witnessed a 67% rain deficit in the post-monsoon season from October to December with Udham Singh Nagar in Kumaon, regarded as the wheat bowl of the state, being the worst affected. Other places like Champawat received only one mm of rainfall, while Bageshwar got no rain at all. Dehradun and its outskirts, too, have seen negligible rain this season.

Experts say that if these weather conditions persist, the state should brace itself for escalating prices of vegetables, grains and fruits. "This year, the first week of January till now has been the warmest in six years. Such weather is very harmful for rabi crops like wheat. Already, reports are coming in on damage to winter vegetable and grain crops which may necessitate import from other states and push prices of these commodities," said Jagdish Kumar, dean of the Pantnagar-based GB Pant Agriculture and Technology University.

What is particularly alarming for farmers is that average winter temperatures which range from 14 to 18 degrees celsius during this time have escalated to 18 to 24 degrees celsius causing damage to the winter rabi crops, especially wheat and masoor. Seeing the climatic pattern, Kumaon agriculture department has already asked for survey reports of losses from the individual districts while officials in Garhwal have declared that wheat produce in high wheat yielding areas like Haridwar is set to go down from an average of 32 quintals per hectare to 20 quintals this year.

The situation is especially precarious in the hilly areas. More than 110,000 hectares across the four hilly districts of Kumaon including Bageshwar, Champawat, Pithoragarh and Almora are sown every year with rabi crops like wheat, masoor, barley, chickpea, mustard and peas. However, only 15% of the land is irrigated manually. Rest of the area is primarily dependent on winter rain.

Farmers say they are spending sleepless nights over when the rain gods would smile. "If it doesn't rain in the next five days, we would be in big trouble and would have to ask for help from the government", said Mahesh

Mehta, a farmer at Maat village in Almora. Another farmer, Vinay Bisht, from Lohaghat in Champawat, said that his fields had already started developing cracks due to the lack of moisture in the ground.

Priyanka Singh, district agriculture officer, Almora, told TOI, that even a little bit of rain could salvage the situation. "Rabi crops as such don't require much rain. But this year, the complete absence of any rainfall has hit farmers very hard. If it doesn't rain this week, it would be a drought-like situation in our district."

Meanwhile, distraught farmers say the erratic weather pattern is leading them to contemplate leaving their profession. "I have been in farming for the past 30 years but it is not a profit yielding occupation anymore. Our fields have become more of a burden now due to fluctuating weather changes," said Mangat Singh, a farmer from Doiwala on the outskirts of Dehradun.