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THE HINDU

Government mulls fresh study on post-harvest loss of farm produce



Organisations of small retailers, street vendors and farmers are already up in arms against the FY'17 Budget proposal of allowing 100 per cent FDI in marketing of food products.

Govt. is working on detailed guidelines regarding 100% FDI in marketing of food products

The Centre is mulling a fresh study on the percentage of post-harvest losses of farm products following contradictory findings.

Official sources told *The Hindu* that a re-look is needed because while some data available with the government shows the percentage of post-harvest losses of perishables such as fruits and vegetables being as high as 30 per cent, studies commissioned by government have put it at as low as five per cent.

Organisations of small retailers, street vendors and farmers are already up in arms against the budget proposal of allowing 100 per cent FDI in marketing of food products.

Demanding a roll-back, they said it will be blatantly wrong on the part of the government to implement this decision ostensibly to bring down wastage

from the prevailing “high levels” when actually the post-harvest losses are “very low”.

The fresh study is also aimed at countering the allegation of such critics that ‘inflated’ farm products wastage data was being shown to justify the move to permit FDI in marketing of food products.

A March 2015 report of the Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR)—Central Institute of Post-Harvest Engineering and Technology (CIPHET)—in Ludhiana showed that the cumulative percentage of post-harvest losses of cereals was low in the range of 4.65–5.99 per cent while that of pulses was between 6.36–8.41 per cent and oil seeds 3.08–9.96 per cent.

As per the report, the maximum losses were in fruits and vegetables (4.58–15.88 per cent) and fisheries—marine (10.52 per cent). Percentage of post-harvest losses was low in milk (0.92 per cent), fisheries-inland (5.23 per cent), meat (2.71 per cent) and poultry (6.74 per cent).

The ICAR-CIPHET study was commissioned by the government.

However, an earlier paper put out by the Department of Industrial Policy and Promotion (or DIPP which formulates the FDI policy) had quoted data from agriculture ministry to say that 25-30 per cent of fruits and vegetables and 5-7 per cent of food grains in India are wasted.

It said post-harvest losses of farm produce, especially of fruits, vegetables and other perishables, have been estimated to be over Rs. one trillion per annum, 57 per cent of which is avoidable wastage and the balance due to avoidable costs of storage and commission.

Senior officials of the agriculture ministry had also said earlier that over 70 per cent of the fruits and vegetable production was wasted and that it accounted for around 40 per cent in terms of economic losses.

The sources said the DIPP had objected to studies showing “very low” wastage saying these findings were far removed from the ground reality. They said there will soon be inter-ministerial discussions on the issue. Detailed guidelines on FDI in marketing of food products will ensure three main objectives: maximum returns for farmers for their produce, huge

employment generation and a major boost to the food processing industry, they said.

According to the DIPP, inadequate cold storage facilities results in huge losses to farmers in terms of wastage of produce, particularly that of fruits and vegetables. It also said that despite permitting 100 per cent FDI through the automatic route (without the government approval) in cold chain, in several agricultural sector activities as well as in wholesale trade, FDI inflows into these activities were not impressive due to the crucial missing link – which is FDI in (food) retail.

Organisations that have opposed FDI in marketing of food products include Confederation of All India Traders, India FDI Watch Campaign, Bhartiya Udyog Vyapar Mandal, Federation of Associations of Maharashtra, The Hawkers Federation and *Janpahal*.

They said the BJP had categorically opposed FDI in multi-brand retail before it came to power at the Centre and the party was now allowing big food companies and MNCs into multi-brand retail trade through the backdoor by allowing 100 per cent FDI in marketing of food products.

Central teams to study damage to winter crop

Wheat-producing States worst affected by untimely rains and hailstorms

The Centre has sent teams to Punjab, Haryana and other northern and western States to assess the loss of winter-sown (rabi) crops, including wheat, due to untimely rains and hailstorms in the past few days.

There are reports of damage to wheat crop in parts of Punjab, Haryana and Western Uttar Pradesh as hail and rain, accompanied with strong winds flattened the standing crop at many places. The current spell of rain and hailstorms in parts of Rajasthan has also threatened the mustard crop.

R.K. Gupta, Director at the Indian Institute of Wheat and Barley Research (IIWBR), told *The Hindu* that it was too early to assess the damage. However, on a conservative side, the wheat crop might have been damaged in five per cent of the total sown area in these northern States. Wheat has been sown on around 29 million hectares this season across the country and out of this, around half the wheat is sown in the northern and western States.

Meanwhile, an Agriculture Ministry official said: “We are monitoring the situation and our teams have already left to assess the crop loss. It would be only after the reports are submitted by these teams that an actual assessment of damage could be figured out.”

Agriculture experts say the current spell of rains is detrimental for the early sown varieties. However, the late-sown crops could survive provided there is no wind or hailstorm in the coming days.

“Untimely rain, hail and strong winds have flattened standing wheat crop. This would certainly reduce yield and affect quality as well,” senior agriculture expert and Punjab State Farmers Commission adviser P.S. Rangi told *The Hindu*. “The damage to wheat could be extensive if heavy spell of rains or hail occurs in the coming days, similar to what had happened last year,” said Mr. Rangi.

He said the rain could also trim the earning of farmers, who had already suffered losses in the previous two years due to the first back-to-back droughts in nearly three decades. In many parts of wheat-producing States in north and central India, the untimely rains and hailstorms last year during the March-April period had significantly damaged the wheat crop, resulting in sharp fall in production by around 9.32 million tonnes.

Telangana budget of Rs. 1.3 lakh crore focusses on irrigation, drinking water

Outlay in tune with Chief Minister Chandrasekhar Rao's repeated assertions

In sharp contrast to previous years, when non-plan expenditure used to be higher than plan expenditure, Telangana Finance Minister Etela Rajender on Monday presented the third budget with an outlay of nearly Rs. 1.30 lakh crore for 2016-17, with a plan expenditure of Rs. 67,630 crore and non-plan amount of Rs. 62,785 crore.

The size of the budget is Rs. 30,000 crore more than the revised estimates for 2015-16 and Rs. 5,000 crore less than that of Andhra Pradesh for 2016-17.

Mr. Rajender defended the higher plan expenditure saying it was “unprecedented” and done without compromising on non-plan commitments by a combination of rationalisation of expenditure and resource augmentation.



Telangana Chief Minister K. Chandrasekhara Reddy with Finance Minister Etela Rajender before the presentation of the budget in Hyderabad on Monday.— Photo: Special Arrangement

As part of rationalisation of expenditure, he explained that a number of plan schemes with similar activity had been clubbed together in a number of departments and a few schemes with only salary component had been shifted to non-plan.

To augment resources, ‘Mission Bhagiratha’ and double bedroom housing were proposed to be funded entirely from extra budgetary resources. Hence, no provision was made under plan for these schemes, except counterpart funding.

The budget estimates, as presented by Mr. Rajender, indicate a revenue surplus of Rs. 3,718 crore and fiscal deficit (expenditure in excess of revenue) of Rs. 23,467 crore which is 3.5 per cent of Gross State Domestic Product. The higher revenue surplus was entirely on account of proposed allocation of Rs. 25,000 crore, mostly capital expenditure, to the irrigation sector.

The huge expenditure on irrigation was in tune with Chief Minister K. Chandrasekhar Rao's repeated assertions that the government will spend Rs. 75,000 crore on the sector over the next three years, starting 2016-17.

Mr. Rajender emphasised irrigation, Mission Bhagiratha and double bedroom houses as the core components of his budget, but substantial allocations were also made for power, agriculture, health, education, welfare, social security pensions, roads and buildings, urban development and law and order.

Odisha team to assess potato availability in West Bengal

With prices of potatoes shooting up sharply, the Odisha government on Monday decided to send an official delegation to neighbouring West Bengal – biggest exporter of potato – to assess its availability and chances of getting adequate tuber stock from there.

Cooperation Minister Damodar Rout, Agriculture and Farmer Empowerment Minister Pradeep Maharathy and Food Supplies and Consumer Welfare Minister Sanjay Das Burma met here to discuss the potato scarcity and find ways to tide over the crisis.

Odisha produces 3 lakh tons of potato against requirement of 11 lakh ton. It depends heavily on West Bengal to meet its requirement. When the scarcity was acute a few years ago, the State government had announced a potato mission for increasing production of tuber. However, the mission failed to yield desired results.

According to the Ministers, the area of potato cultivation has been increased from 15,805 hectare to 25,270 hectare under the mission. Due to rise in temperature and fewer cold days, the potato cultivation was hit, the Ministers said.

The Ministers, however, said potato scarcity was felt all over the country. "While per kg price in Kolkata is Rs.14, it is Rs.20 in Chennai, Mumbai (Rs.19), New Delhi (Rs.14), Bhubaneswar (Rs.16) and Sambalpur (Rs.16)," they said.

In view of rising potato prices, the government on Monday declared to make enforcement activities stricter in order to ensure stability and take stringent

action against hoarders. Collectors have been asked to take action against unscrupulous traders.

Workshop on man-animal conflicts

Kerala Agricultural University will organise a two-day consultative workshop on 'Human-wildlife conflicts in the eastern and northern forest circles of Kerala: issues and possible solutions' at the College of Forestry, Vellanikkara, on Tuesday and Wednesday.

The workshop will be inaugurated by Pramod G. Krishnan, Chief Conservator of Forests (Wild life), Thrissur. Around 50 selected farmers representing the eastern and northern forest circles of Kerala who are affected by human-wildlife conflicts, forest officers and representatives of the Krishi Vigyan Kendras in this region will participate in the workshop.

The workshop will conclude on Wednesday with draft proposals on possible solutions in curtailing conflicts between human beings and wildlife.

In Kolar, no tomato will go waste

Bureaucrat comes up with idea to convert it into fodder

A meaningful and constructive solution for managing tomato waste has been found.

Deputy Commissioner K.V. Trilokchandra has conceived an idea of converting tomato into animal fodder. He has submitted a plan to the State government, which has given the green signal for setting up a plant at the Agriculture Produce Marketing Committee (APMC) yard in Kolar.

Mr. Trilokchandra got the idea after seeing a huge quantity of the vegetable being abandoned at the yard, one of the largest tomato marketing yards in Asia. On an average, transactions involving 150-200 tonnes take place every day during lean season. About 15 tonnes are wasted during loading and unloading.

At the same time, farmers dump huge quantities of tomatoes on the roadside when there is a glut. Now, this will be fed into the plant that will turn it into a lycopene-rich meal for poultry, cattle, pig, and fish.

Culture fest: Landless farmers rue crop loss

A day after the controversial World Culture Festival on the Yamuna floodplains came to an end, farmers living on its banks said the event destroyed their living and claimed it will take at least two years to make the flattened riverbed suitable for cultivation.

As the authorities began removing garbage from over 100 acres of land where the stage and stands were erected besides other temporary structures, the landless farmers said the compensation given to them was “too little” and that the event, organised by Sri Sri Ravi Shankar's Art of Living Foundation, extensively damaged Yamuna's eco-system.

They said bulldozing of the land for the event had caused extensive damage to the riverbed as it disrupted water flow significantly.

Farmer Chote Lal Chowdhary claimed his 12 bigha land, on which he grew vegetables and flowering plants, was destroyed completely but despite that he was given a “very small compensation”.

“They destroyed the vegetables which were ready to be harvested for building access roads to the event venue. Per bigha produce would have fetched me at least Rs. 50,000. But I have been paid just Rs. 10,000. Nobody discussed or spoke to us. They threatened us with police action when we tried to protest,” said Chowdhury.

He said he had been growing vegetables there for many years on contract basis.

Kamla Devi, who also claimed that her 5 bigha land was damaged, said, “I stood in front of the JCB machine, I told them to stop but my land was bulldozed. On one side you talk about spreading happiness and peace, on the other you forget about peace or happiness in our lives. You are snatching away our livelihood,” she said.

Art of Living Foundation, however, rubbished the allegations, saying those whose land was taken for the festival were given adequate compensation and that their plots were used with their consent.—PTI

Kejriwal orders crop damage assessment

Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal has asked the Divisional Commissioner to assess the damage to crops due to unseasonal hailstorm and rains in the city over the past weekend.

“Have asked Div Commissioner to assess damage to crops of farmers in Delhi due to unseasonal rains (sic),” Mr Kejriwal tweeted on Monday.

Last year, the Aam Aadmi Party government had announced a compensation of Rs. 20,000 per acre to farmers who faced losses due to crop damage.

The government had then claimed it was the highest compensation for crop loss announced by any government in the country so far.

Sources said the final decision on compensation will be taken only after the assessment report on crop damage by the DC. “The government has not set any deadline for the submission of the report. It may take at least 10 days for the DC to submit it. Although the government has received several reports from area MLAs on crop loss, it will take final decision on compensation based on the DC’s assessment report,” sources said.

PM crop insurance scheme from Apr 1

The state government will begin implementing the Prime Minister Fasal Bima Yojana (PMFBY) from April 1, the Legislative Council was told on Monday. Replying to a debate on a question raised by NCP MLA Narendra Patil, Revenue Minister Eknath Khadse said compensation worth Rs 2,000 crore, which includes a 45 per cent central and state government share and 10 per cent by farmers, will be disbursed. “This measure will incur an additional burden of Rs 200 crore on the state exchequer,” he said.

Replying to supplementary queries, Khadse blamed the meager compensation given earlier for select crops to flawed compensation norms decided by the previous Congress-NCP government, which evoked strong reactions from the Opposition. Khadse said that in the crop insurance compensation scheme, the Centre has now included all types of crops.

“Damages to crops in post harvesting, cutting and harvesting, storm, unseasonal rains, flooding of fields, landslides and hailstorms have been

included in the norms for granting compensation under the scheme,” he said.
—PTI

Nine-hour power supply to farm sector under study

The Andhra Pradesh government is considering providing nine-hour power supply to the farm sector, said Minister K. Atchannaidu in the Legislative Council here on Monday.

Responding to various queries related to free power to farmers during question hour, the Minister said that the government was bearing Rs. 3,186 crore on subsidy towards free power. He said that instead of three time slots of power supply to pump sets from 4 a.m to 11 a.m, 11 a.m to 6 p.m., and 9 p.m. to 4 a.m, farmers wanted it to be given in two slots. The proposal is under examination, he said.

‘Five star’ pump sets

Another initiative would be to install quality ‘five star’ pump sets which cost double than that of conventional pump sets but they would help in saving 30 per cent of power. The Discoms were supplying quality pump sets to farmers free of cost and the amount could be recovered in three years through the power saved. Another 1.2 lakh new pump sets would be sanctioned under NTR Jalasiri and applications had been invited.

The Central government, impressed with the initiative, offered to give another one lakh five star pump sets to the State, he said. Demand for solar pump sets too was increasing with 4.5 lakh people applying so far and 10,000 solar pump sets would be given this year. He positively responded to suggestion to give solar pump sets on subsidy in Anantapur district and extend the high voltage distribution system.

Steps were also taken to ensure quality power supply and prevent breakdown of transformers due to overload, he said. In case of breakdown of transformers, standing instructions were given to the department to replace them in 24 hours.

‘Pattiseema is part

of Polavaram’

Water Resources Minister Devineni Umamaheswara Rao reiterated that Pattiseema was part of the Polavaram project and was taken up with Rs.1,200 crore to bring Godavari water in the interim period till the first phase is completed by 2018. He said that diaphragm wall and spillway works were being speeded up and under the Relief and Rehabilitation package, houses were being constructed in 10 villages, including seven submergence villages. While Union government was positive about releasing funds for Polavaram, the State allocated Rs. 3,360 crore in the budget to speed up work. He said Polavaram project cost was revised to Rs.16,000 crore in 2011-12, while member Md.Jani said according to latest estimates, Rs. 30,000 crore was required for the project.

Bargur cattle exhibition uncertain this year

Bargur cattle rearers have lost hope for conduct of the annual exhibition this year, following the notification for elections to Tamil Nadu Assembly by the Election Commission of India

The Department of Animal Husbandry initiated exhibition of Bargur cattle two years back, and has been able to galvanise rearing of the unique breed.

The second annual exhibition conducted during the same month last year at Thurasanampalayam village attracted hundreds of rearers. The Department enhanced the prize-money last year for encouraging better participation.

No funding

This year, the Department has not received funding for the purpose even before the date for Assembly elections was announced, it is learnt.

The uncertainty in conduct of annual exhibition is a disappointment for buyers too. The cattle breed is sought after by farmers to plough fields and draw carts, and for fertigating the soil with its dung of high manure value.

The solace for rearers, however, is progress in the work on Bargur Cattle Research Station being carried out by the Tamil Nadu Veterinary and Animal Sciences University (TANUVAS)

The research station for indigenous breed cattle is coming up on a 50-acre site.

The facility, sources said, will be established over five years at an investment of Rs. 6 crore.

The initial instalment of Rs. 1.37 crore has already been released.

The Research Station will have the mandate of increasing milk yield of the cattle through selective breeding.

Harvesting of tamarind begins at Kolli Hills



The tamarind stock that arrived at the Thammampatti weekly market in Salem

With the commencement of tamarind harvesting in the villages in Kolli Hills, the weekly market in Thammampatti town near here has started receiving good stock.

More than 100 tribal villages surrounding Gundani, Aazhipatti, Keeraikkadu, and Velikkadu on the Kolli Hills accounted for a large number of tamarind trees.

The price of a kilogram of Kolli Hills tamarind ranged between Rs. 32 and Rs. 45. The price of the fruit is on the higher side during the commencement of the season, compared to last year, the locals say.

The Kolli Hills farmers brought about 200 baskets of tamarind for the weekly market held on last Wednesday. With the season picking up, the arrival of stock is expected to go up in the coming weeks. During the peak period, the Thammampatti weekly market is expected to receive about 1,000 baskets of tamarind, the farmers say.

Inflation stays negative for 16th month



The rate of price rise in the case of vegetables was (-) 3.34 per cent, and for fruits, it stood at (—)1.95 per cent.

It remained at (-) 0.91 per cent in February as food articles, mainly vegetables and pulses turned cheaper.

The inflation based on Wholesale Price Index remained in the negative zone for a 16th straight month at (—) 0.91 per cent in February as food articles, mainly vegetables and pulses turned cheaper.

The Wholesale Price Index-based inflation was (-) 0.9 per cent in January. In February last year, it was (-)2.17 per cent.

This is the 16th straight month since November 2014 when deflationary pressure has persisted.

Food inflation stood at 3.35 per cent in February compared with 6.02 per cent in January, showed official data, which was released on Monday.

Inflation in pulses and onion eased to 38.84 per cent and (-) 13.22 per cent, respectively. The rate of price rise in the case of vegetables was (-) 3.34 per cent, and for fruits, it stood at (—)1.95 per cent.

Price rise in potato was (—) 6.28 per cent while that of egg, meat and fish came in at 3.47 per cent.

The inflation print in the fuel and power segment was (—) 6.40 per cent and for manufactured products, it read (—) 0.58 per cent in February.

The December WPI inflation has been revised to (—)1.06 per cent from the provisional estimate of (—) 0.73 per cent.

Reserve Bank mainly looks at retail inflation data, which is expected later in the day while firming up monetary policy stance.

It also takes into account industrial production numbers, which as per latest reading fell for a third straight month, contracting 1.5 per cent in January due to poor showing of manufacturing.

Industry has raised its pitch for a rate cut as factory output numbers continue to disappoint and the government stuck to the fiscal consolidation path in the Budget 2016-17, giving more elbowroom to the apex bank to ease monetary policy at the first bimonthly policy review for the next fiscal on April 5.

Retail inflation at four-month low, spurs calls for a rate cut

The deceleration in inflation is attributed to a significant drop in food prices

Retail inflation slowed to a four-month low in February, while the wholesale price index posted a negative reading for a 16th straight month, prompting industry groups to call on the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) to cut interest rates to spur economic growth.

Consumer price index-based inflation decelerated to 5.2 per cent from 5.7 per cent in the preceding month. Wholesale prices also continued to soften with official numbers for the wholesale price index (WPI) showing a 0.91 per cent contraction in February.

The data marks the first break in the six-month streak of accelerating retail inflation. Coming soon after official statistics showing industrial output

continues to shrink, the figures signal domestic demand is yet to gain significant traction. “The continued decline in prices of manufacturing goods point towards fragile demand conditions and indicates that robust recovery has yet to set in,” Chandrajit Banerjee, Director General, CII said.



“At this juncture, when the growth momentum is below expectations and the government has committed to stay the course of fiscal consolidation, CII is hopeful that the RBI would work in sync with the government for building a resilient growth trajectory by initiating monetary easing measures to complement the supportive fiscal initiatives announced in the Budget,” he said.

RBI Governor Raghuram Rajan had on Saturday taken note of the poor industrial performance in January and said while the economy was recovering, this recovery was volatile and that not all economic indicators were moving in the same direction.

Index for Industrial Production (IIP) in January showed output contracted 1.53 per cent compared with the 1.18 per cent contraction in December 2015.

“The annual rate of inflation, based on monthly WPI, stood at -0.91 per cent (provisional) for the month of February, 2016 (over February, 2015) as compared to (-)0.90 per cent (provisional) for the previous month and (-)2.17 per cent during the corresponding month of the previous year,” according to a government statement. “The decline in inflation is attributed to

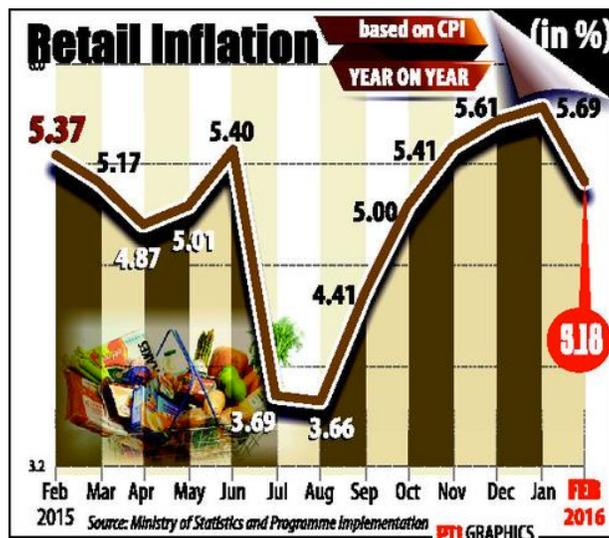
a significant drop in food prices and is in alignment with market expectations,” Mr. Banerjee of the CII said.

Food inflation in the CPI came in at 5.5 per cent in February compared with 6.7 per cent in January. In the WPI, the rate of inflation in food articles also decreased to 3.35 per cent in February from 6 per cent in January. Primary article inflation in the WPI slowed down significantly in February to 1.6 per cent compared to 4.6 per cent in January.

“Prices of manufactured products continue to remain subdued and are a reflection of the weak demand conditions that persist in the economy,” said Harshvardhan Neotia, President, FICCI. “IIP numbers released last week reported negative growth for the third consecutive month in January 2016 and highlight that signs of pick up in the manufacturing sector remain elusive.” While the rate of inflation in manufactured products did remain negative, it moved closer to positive territory in February, coming in at -0.6 per cent compared to -1.2 per cent in January.

Similarly, the rate of inflation in the ‘fuel & power’ segment in the WPI was -6.4 per cent in February compared to -9.2 per cent in January. The ‘fuel & light’ segment in the CPI came in at 4.6 per cent in February, down from 5.3 per cent in January.

Inflation in the housing segment of the CPI accelerated to 5.3 per cent from 5.2 per cent in January.



Announce National Rubber Policy soon: UPASI

The United Planters' Association of Southern India has urged the Government to announce the National Rubber Policy soon. In a press release, the association president N. Dharmaraj said that the National Expert Committee on Rubber had been having discussions for the last one-and-a-half years.

Huge imbalances

During this period, there had been huge imbalances in the distribution of value within the rubber value chain. The policy should address issues such as grade-wise production targets, import targets and sustainable price.

Natural rubber production and productivity has been declining steadily in the country since 2011-2012.

Growers are abandoning tapping and the tapping area has come down to 56 per cent of the total area under rubber.

The lakeside story



Joker butterfly



Painted Storks



Singanallur Lake



Cormorants

Singanallur Lake is a bio-diversity hot spot and now there is a Urban Nature Interpretation & Education Centre that informs people about its wealth

Six hundred and seventy five — that is the total number of species documented at Singanallur Lake. Birds, butterflies, insects, plants...every single life form supported by the wetland makes it to the list. And, you can learn all about it at the newly opened Urban Nature Interpretation & Education Centre (UNIEC) at the Singanallur Lake.

P. Pramod, senior scientist at Salim Ali Centre for Ornithology and Natural History (SACON), says it's been a dream to have an education centre at Singanallur Lake. "For the last 15 years, we have been visiting the lake with children there to see the birds and butterflies . The city corporation has understood the importance of the wetland now and is joining hands with us. They are taking the lead with UNIEC," says Pramod.

Joseph Reginald, a PhD scholar at SACON, has observed the lake for over five years as a part of his doctoral thesis. "Did you know that areas near Singanallur Lake are home to over 150 species of medicinal plants?" he asks. "Mudukkathan keerai grows there in plenty. Farmers from the surrounding areas can often be seen there collecting the greens. This keerai has a lot of medicinal properties," explains Vinny R. Peter, who is also doing a doctorate on the bio-diveristy of Singanallur Lake.

What makes this wetland unique is that it is located right in the heart of the city. "The urban population can connect with Nature right here without having to travel outside. The lake attracts thousands of birds from across the world. It is about time we conserve, nurture, develop and support this wetland. More so, when Coimbatore is all set to become a smart city. We need such bio-diversity hotpots where people can come to enjoy Nature and learn about conservation too," says Pramod.

Vinny says Singanallur Lake is one of the least disturbed wetlands within the city limits. "Agriculture thrives in the surrounding environment. The water body supports many livelihoods . The greenery serves as fodder for the cattle. The palm trees and coconut trees in the area help retain a good groundwater table. There is abundant vegetation on the bunds. For a healthy food chain, a wetland has to be surrounded by greenery. The bushes near the wetland attract over 70 different species of butterflies."

The centre also offers nature education to students. Says Joseph: “They can see and observe the life cycle of a butterfly rather than learning it from a PowerPoint presentation. Though the wetland is polluted because of untreated drainage that is let in, it is still least disturbed in terms of encroachments. Farmers still grow sugarcane, paddy, and vegetables here. Setting up an education centre is the first layer of protection for any wetland. To take it further, it can be declared as a community reserve area or given a sanctuary status. Students can learn about medicinal properties of plant, observe birds and butterflies, learn about the migratory route of birds, and also become environmentally responsible.”

Activities at UNIEC

Nature walks and guided tours

Bird watching and butterfly spotting

School-level studies and projects related to the biodiversity of the region

Nature photography, art camps and cycling

Tree planting initiatives

Blueberries may help beat Alzheimer’s: study

This August 31, 2009 file photo shows droplets of water on highbush blueberries in Wiscasset, Maine.

Researcher says the 'super fruit ' can have a real benefit in improving memory and cognitive function in some older adults

Eating blueberries, the well-known ‘super fruit’, may not only lower the risk of heart disease and cancer, but also provide protection against Alzheimer’s disease, a new study has claimed.

The fruit is loaded with healthful antioxidants, and these substances could help prevent the devastating effects of this increasingly common form of dementia, researchers said.

Wonder berry

“Our new findings corroborate those of previous animal studies and preliminary human studies, adding further support to the notion that blueberries can have a real benefit in improving memory and cognitive function in some older adults,” said Robert Krikorian from University of Cincinnati in the U.S.

Blueberries’ beneficial effects could be due to flavonoids called anthocyanins, which have been shown to improve animals’ cognition, he said.



Two human studies conducted

Researchers conducted two human studies to follow up on earlier clinical trials. One study involved 47 adults aged 68 and older, who had mild cognitive impairment, a risk condition for Alzheimer’s disease.

Scientists gave them either freeze-dried blueberry powder, which is equivalent to a cup of berries, or a placebo powder once a day for 16 weeks.

Improved memory

“There was improvement in cognitive performance and brain function in those who had the blueberry powder compared with those who took the placebo. The blueberry group demonstrated improved memory and improved access to words and concepts,” said Mr. Krikorian.

Researchers also conducted functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI), which showed increased brain activity in those who ingested the blueberry powder.

And the placebo group ...

The second study included 94 people aged 62 to 80, who were divided into four groups. The participants did not have objectively measured cognitive issues, but they subjectively felt their memories were declining.

The groups received blueberry powder, fish oil, fish oil and powder or placebo.

“The results were not as robust as with the first study. Cognition was somewhat better for those with powder or fish oil separately, but there was little improvement with memory,” said Mr. Krikorian.

Also, fMRI results were not as striking for those receiving blueberry powder. The effect may have been smaller in this case because these participants had less severe issues when they entered the study, researchers said.



The Ides of March return to haunt

The impact of the unseasonal rain on the rabi crop looks less than last year, but fingers crossed for later this week.

March is always a tricky month for Indian agriculture, with rabi season crops like wheat, mustard, chana (chickpea), masur (lentil) and matar (field pea) in early maturity or harvesting stages.

Last year saw heavy rain accompanied by strong winds and hail lash large parts of north, west and central India at the beginning of March; these regions ended up receiving between 5 and 15 times their normal average quota of rain for the month.

This year, we are witnessing a repeat — though with significant differences.

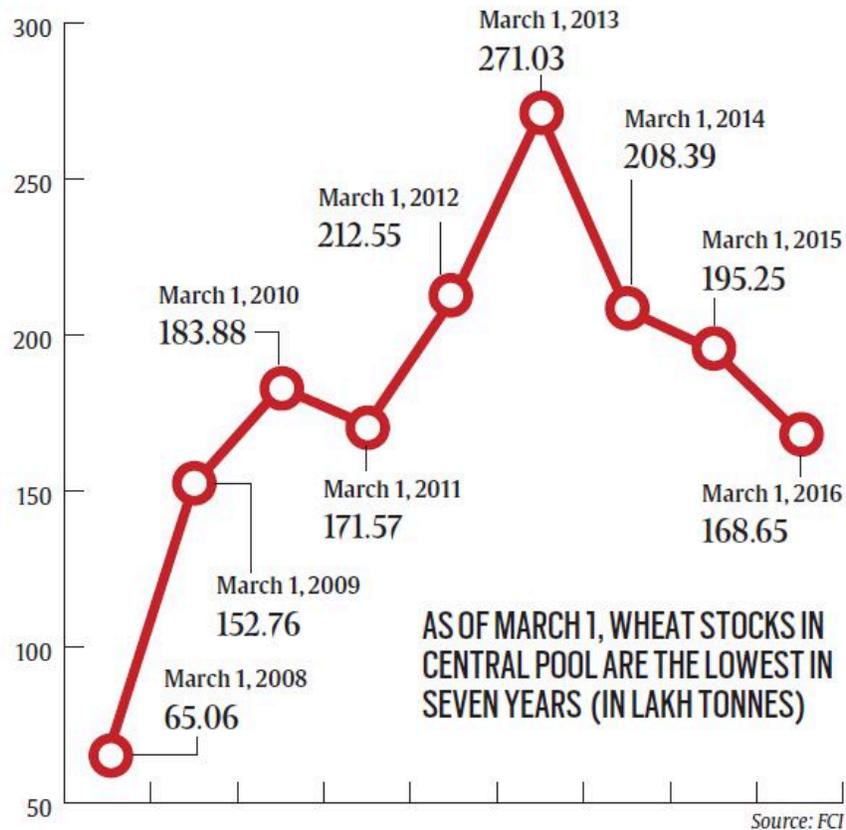
The current rain — again, courtesy a low pressure depression induced by western disturbances over north Pakistan and the adjoining Jammu & Kashmir regions — started from March 11 night, and has now more or less stopped. While there have been reports of strong winds, thunderstorms and hail this time too, they seem confined to isolated places over northwest India, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Bihar, Jharkhand and Odisha.



The flattened wheat crop at Chamaria village in Rohtak district after rain and hail on Saturday. The crop is currently in its crucial ‘milk’ stage. (Express photo)

But the big worry is the Met Department’s warning of a fresh western disturbance affecting the western Himalayan region from Wednesday night and over the adjoining northwest Indian plains the following day. The impact of the wet spell, both current and the one forecast, would be largely on the wheat due for harvesting from next month.

The wheat crop is currently in the ‘milk’ or ‘early dough’ stage in most of India. This is the period when flowering is already complete and grain formation/filling — accumulation of starch matter in the kernels — has just about begun. Rain now isn’t bad really, so long as it is gentle showers that help keep the mercury from rising. Ideally, day temperatures should remain within 35 degrees Celsius throughout March. Any sudden spike could lead to premature drying and ripening of the grain. The usual thumb rule here is that every extra day on the field during the grain-filling stage confers an additional wheat yield of 45-50 kg per hectare.



This is precisely what happened in 2014, when wheat production hit a record 95.85 million tonnes (mt) on the back of an extended winter. Last year too, India looked set for a bumper harvest before the untimely heavy showers with strong winds and hail led to largescale lodging of the crop. As a result, production, which in February 2015 was estimated at 95.76 mt, was revised downwards to 86.53 mt.

“There hasn’t been any widespread lodging reported this time so far. In some areas, partial lodging has happened. But even this crop can recover if the skies clear, which they have today, and there are no further heavy rains,” says R K Gupta, acting director of the Indian Institute of Wheat & Barley Research at Karnal, Haryana.

The negative production impact from “five per cent crop lodging”, according to him, can be more than offset if the “remaining 95 per cent” wheat benefits from the lowering of temperatures, which, until last week, was about 5 degrees above normal. These could have well led to the crop maturing 7-10 days early and translating into a yield loss of roughly half-a-tonne per hectare, or 13-14 mt in all. That can have serious implications when wheat

stocks in government godowns are at a seven-year-low (see chart), although they are still above the normative minimum requirement of 7.5 mt at the start of the new marketing season from April 1.

The impact of the rain is seen to be less in mustard, where over 70% harvesting is complete. “Only the standing crop sown late, towards the first week of November (as against the normal time of October 15-25), may have suffered damage in some parts. On the whole, we expect a bumper crop, especially with no major incidence of stem rot, white rust or alternaria blight this year,” says Dhiraj Singh, who heads the Directorate of Rapeseed-Mustard Research at Bharatpur, Rajasthan.

There is some concern with regard to rabi pulses, particularly chana. While the crop in western and southern India was already harvested by February-end, this is not the case in MP, UP, Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh. The crop here is still either in the field or lying on the threshing floor after having been harvested.

“The standing crop is prone to pod shattering, when you have heavy rains followed by sudden drying due to sunshine. Even the harvested grain that has not been threshed can suffer quality deterioration, or germinate,” notes Narendra Pratap Singh, director, Indian Institute of Pulses Research, Kanpur. As of now, the damage to the rabi crop from the unseasonal March rain appears to be not as bad as last year, though there may be individual farmers who would have been as, if not more, affected. Whether there is more to come will be known after March 18.

Govt aims to bring 50% farmers under PMFBY in next few years

As of now, there are only 11 non-life insurance companies, including the state-owned specialised agriculture insurer Agriculture Insurance Company, which have been empanelled by the government for the implementation of the PMFBY.

The government is targeting to double the insurance coverage under crop insurance through Pradhan Mantri Fasal Bima Yojana in a couple of years, a senior government official said here on Monday. The scheme will be implemented in the country effective from April 1.

“As of now, 23 per cent of the country’s total farmer’s population is covered under various existing crop insurance schemes. However, the government is looking at taking it to more than 50 per cent through the PMFBY in next two years,” said Ashish Kumar Bhutani, Joint Secretary, Ministry of Agriculture, at an event organised by GIC Re.

As of now, it is mandatory for the loanee farmers to go for crop insurance. However, the government’s focus will be to bring more and more non-loanee farmers, which comprise merely 5 per cent of total farmers at present, under the scheme in future, he said, adding, “a total of 5,000 automated weather stations will be set up across the country under PPP model for the successful implementation of the scheme.”

“The agriculture insurance is the largest insurance portfolio after motor and health,” GIC Re CMD Alice Vaidyan said.

“The insurance regulator, Irda is working on a host of measures to create such a platform so as to push agricultural insurance and other insurance products in the country,” Irda executive director Sriram Taranikanti said.

As of now, there are only 11 non-life insurance companies, including the state-owned specialised agriculture insurer Agriculture Insurance Company, which have been empanelled by the government for the implementation of the PMFBY. However, all the four state-owned non-life insurers have evinced their interest to participate in the scheme.

“From our side, we have requested the government to involve all the four PSU general insurers into the scheme in a major way,” New India Assurance chairman and managing director G Srinivasan, who is also the chairman of General Insurer (PSU) Association (GIPSA) said.

As per the scheme, the farmers’ share of premium under PMFBY will be based on one season, one rate.

After unseasonal rains, Arvind Kejriwal orders assessment of crop damage

Last year, AAP government had announced a compensation of Rs 20,000 per acre to farmers who faced losses due to crop damage caused by rain.



Delhi CM Arvind Kejriwal

Following unseasonal rains and hailstorms in the national capital, Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal Monday ordered Divisional Commissioner A Anbarasu to assess the damage to farmers' crops. "Have asked Div Commissioner to assess damage to crops of farmers in Delhi due to unseasonal rains (sic)," Kejriwal tweeted.

Last year, AAP government had announced a compensation of Rs 20,000 per acre to farmers who faced losses due to crop damage caused by rain.

Farmers in outer Delhi had lost their crops to untimely rains in 2015 as well. The findings of the Aam Aadmi Party Gramin Morcha had shown that crops spread over approximately 80 acres were destroyed by unexpected climatic patterns in 2015, affecting about one lakh families in six assembly constituencies in rural Delhi.

Delhi BJP President Satish Upadhyay had, on Sunday, written to Lieutenant Governor Najeeb Jung, asking him to appoint a nodal officer to assess the crop loss due to untimely rains in the last few days. The Delhi BJP has demanded a compensation of Rs 50,000 to Rs 70,000 per acre for farmers.

Unseasonal rains, hail damage rabi crops in key food-bowl states



Farmers in Patiala tend to flattened wheat crops. Heavy rains induced by westerly disturbances flattened the wheat crop less than a month before harvest in key food-producing states. (Bharat Bhushan/HT Photo)

Heavy rainfall accompanied by hail over the weekend damaged crops in key food-producing states across north and central India, triggering fears of higher food prices amid a deepening nationwide agrarian crisis.

A good crop was a must this season for the sustenance of farmers who suffered because of unseasonal rainfall in March-April last year followed by a drought that reduced output of summer crops. A good yield was expected this year but heavy rains induced by westerly disturbances flattened the wheat crop less than a month before harvest in Punjab, Haryana, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh.

“The damage can be up to 50% in several districts of Haryana, Punjab, northern Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh,” an agriculture ministry official said, adding that state governments had been asked to submit reports.

Delhi chief minister Arvind Kejriwal ordered divisional commissioner A Anbarasu to assess the damage to crops in the Capital. “Have asked Div

Commissioner to assess damage to crops of farmers in Delhi due to unseasonal rains (sic),” Kejriwal tweeted.

The governments of Madhya Pradesh, Haryana and Rajasthan also instructed officials to assess the loss.

In 2015, the Centre gave states about Rs 8,000 crore for crop losses due to unseasonal rains.

In Madhya Pradesh, protesting farmers took a tractor trolley full of hailstones to the office of the SDM, Banda in Sagar district and a chakka jam protest was held on NH-86 near Banda on the Sagar-Chatarpur road to draw the administration’s attention towards damage to crops.

In Rohtak, Ram Chander, a Dalit farmer who had taken two acres of land on contract for Rs 25,000, said rain and thunderstorm had almost completely destroyed his wheat crop. “There is not much left,” he said, crying for government help.

Farmer Kundan Lal Jatav of Ghatla village in Rajasthan’s Alwar district said with tears in his eyes that rain and hail ruined his entire mustard crop on seven bighas of land.

The government needs about 62 million tonnes of grains, including wheat and rice, to ensure steady supply of food items under the national food security law. Good crops in 2014 had ensured adequate stocks but crop damage in two consecutive years can exert a burden on the buffer maintained by the Food Corporation of India.

Experts say the government might not have enough buffer stocks to sell in the market to keep wheat prices under check.

Apart from wheat, officials admit, there has been extensive damage to mustard, potato and peas in these states. The showers have withered the flowering of mangoes in Uttar Pradesh and apple, pears and apricots in Himachal Pradesh.

Congress vice-president Rahul Gandhi raised the issue in the Lok Sabha and asked the government to assess the crop damage and provide adequate compensation to the affected farmers.

“After the hailstorm and heavy rains, farmers of northern India are in distress. The government must act to give relief to farmers affected by crop damage,” Gandhi said in the Lok Sabha.

(With inputs from Jaipur, Chandigarh, Bhopal and Meerut)

THE HINDU BusinessLine

February WPI unchanged at (-) 0.9% month-on-month



The Wholesale Price Index (WPI) based inflation remained in negative territory for the sixteenth straight month in February at (-) 0.91 per cent against (-) 0.90 per cent in January.

Manufactured products inflation, which has a weightage of 65 per cent, grew 0.3 per cent. Food articles inflation was down 3.2 per cent in February.

Meanwhile, the overall WPI for December 2015 has been revised to (-) 1.06 per cent from a level of (-) 0.73 per cent announced earlier.

Unseasonal rains threaten to trim rabi output



Wheat crop hit in parts of Punjab, Haryana, Delhi; spot and futures price of the cereal inch up

Unseasonal rains coupled with hailstorm over the week-end over North Western and parts of Central India has spelt troubles for wheat farmers in the region, besides threatening to trim the country's rabi cereal output for the second year in a row.

Parts of key wheat producing States of Punjab, Haryana, Rajasthan and western Uttar Pradesh were hit by the unseasonal rains resulting in flooding of farmlands and flattening of the ripening winter crops such as wheat and mustard among others. Wheat crops have been worst hit in parts of Punjab, Haryana and the outskirts of Delhi.

While it is too early to estimate the crop losses, the Centre is putting together inter-ministerial assessment teams to visit states, including Punjab and Haryana, impacted by the unseasonal rains.

“There have been some crop losses in these States due to the unseasonal rains,” said RK Gupta, Director of the Karnal-based Indian Institute of Wheat and Barley Research. However, the rains may prove beneficial for the late sown wheat crop and thereby could offset this impact, provided the weather remains favourable – say in terms of lower temperatures over the next couple of weeks, Gupta added.

Prices firm up

Following the report of crop losses, the wheat futures on the NCDEX edged up by about one per cent, while the prices of the cereal in the spot markets such as Kota, Rajkot and Indore also firmed up marginally.

After touching a record output of 96 million tonnes (mt) in 2013-14 – aided by a prolonged winter – wheat production was impacted by unseasonal rains last year and fell sharply to 86.5 million tonnes.

For the current 2015-16 season, the government has recently forecast a wheat output of 93.82 mt, despite the acreage being lower by about a million hectares.

Trade sources see a repeat of last year in terms of wheat harvest in the current rabi season, not only on account of the impact of unseasonal rains, but also due to a lower acreage. Wheat acreage this year was lower by about 13 lakh hectares over last year at 292.5 lakh hectares.

Lower wheat crop

While the harvest of wheat has already begun in States like Madhya Pradesh and Gujarat, the initial trends suggest that crop is lower than last year in these states. A lower domestic wheat crop could spur imports of the cereal as the Central Pool stocks stood lower at 16.8 million tonnes as on March 1, 2016.

Officials in Agriculture Ministry said the inter-ministerial teams will be deployed as soon as the affected States submitted their own assessment reports. The Centre is also working on creating a Union Territory Disaster Response Fund (UTDRF) on the lines of the existing State Disaster Response Fund for states, to take care of demand for relief from Union Territories – in this case the National Capital Territory (NCT) of Delhi, an official said.

“Agriculture Minister Radha Mohan Singh and his team of senior officials have spoken to farm ministers and officials from all affected States. The Minister also spoke to the Delhi Chief Minister. He has assured them that early action will be taken to provide relief,” the official said.

More trouble ahead?

Even as the core of the Western Disturbance that brought about the unseasonal rains and hailstorm has left the north western part of the country, another disturbance, though of lower intensity, is expected to hit the region on Wednesday, according to weather forecasts. This could bring in more rainfall over the key wheat growing areas.

Trade sources also said that the flattened crop would result in higher harvesting cost for the growers.

Besides wheat, other crops such as mustard and gram have also come under the impact of the rains in the region. Vivek Puri, Managing Director, Puri Oil Mills said the unseasonal rains have caused concerns but the situation is still not that serious as due to a slight delay in sowing the crop has not reached the ripening stage. Therefore, the loss to the crop is marginal as of now, but if there is bad weather for the next 10-15 days then it will have an impact on its production.

Mustard Research Promotion Consortium, a trade research body, feels that weather over the next few days would be crucial in deciding the output. “If there is an increase in hail or strong winds then the situation could worsen. This year, the pest attack is also less than last year,” it said.

All-India rain deficit halves as N-W gains most

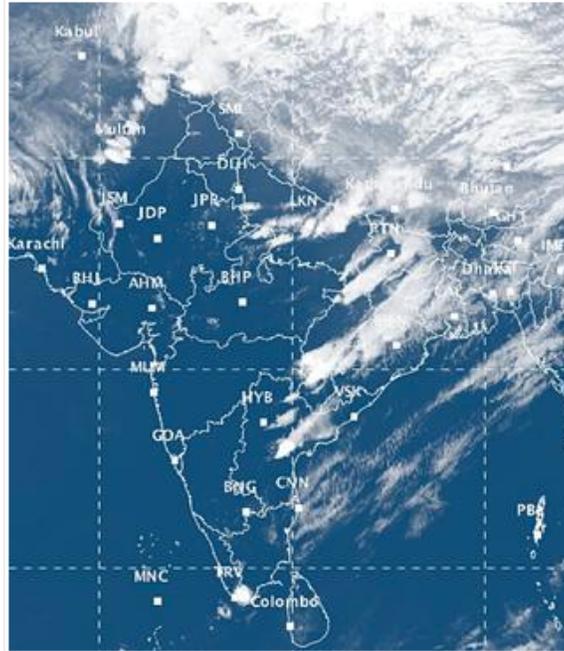
Rain deficit for the country has come down by more than half to 30 per cent during the first week of March compared to the position at the end of the two dry months of January and February.

Weather-setting western disturbances suddenly turned productive for North-West India and East India, though with collateral damage to standing crops which were readying for harvest at many areas.

Violent weather

As happens with the heated up air over land during this time of the year, incoming moisture-laden western disturbances have sparked violent weather marked by wind gusts, squall, hail and thunderstorms.

An incumbent is preparing to sign off from North-West India after setting up thundery weather over North-West India and East India over the past couple of days.



Rainfall trend

An extended outlook for three days until March 21 by India Met Department said that rain and snow is likely over Jammu and Kashmir and rain or thundershowers over the plains.

Meanwhile, a statistics put out by the Met during the period from March 1 to 9 says that 15 Met subdivisions received excess rain during this period.

These are West Rajasthan, East Rajasthan, Haryana, Chandigarh, Saurashtra, Gujarat, Konkan, Madhya Maharashtra, Marathwada, North Interior Karnataka, Telangana, Vidarbha, Chhattisgarh, East Madhya Pradesh, Jharkhand, and East Uttar Pradesh.

Punjab and Sub-Himalayan West Bengal received normal showers while they were deficient over Himachal Pradesh, Delhi, West Madhya Pradesh, Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Meghalaya, Gangetic West Bengal, Coastal Andhra Pradesh and Lakshadweep.

According to the US Climate Prediction Centre, more snow and rain is likely for Jammu and Kashmir, Himachal Pradesh, Punjab, and Uttarakhand during the period from March 19 to 25.

Vegetable oil imports up 19% in Nov-Feb period



The import of vegetable oils during the first four months of the current oil year (November-October 2016-17) increased by 19 per cent to 5,125,017 tonnes as compared to 4,295,443 tonnes in the same period last year.

Notably, imports of refined oils for the November-February period jumped by more than three times to 7,89,062 tonnes for the period under review as against 2,53,780 tonnes in the same period last year.

According to data compiled by the Solvent Extractors' Association (SEA) of India, in the last one year, CIF Indian port prices of edible oils have moved downward (except crude sunflower oil) in line with a fall in international prices. RBD palmolein prices fell by \$56 (- 8 per cent), crude palm oil by \$49 (- 7 per cent) and crude soybean oil by \$58 (- 7 per cent).

However, in the last one year the rupee has depreciated by 10 per cent.

In the November-February period, palm oil imports increased marginally to 2,960,002 tonnes from 2,803,942 tonnes during the same period of last year.

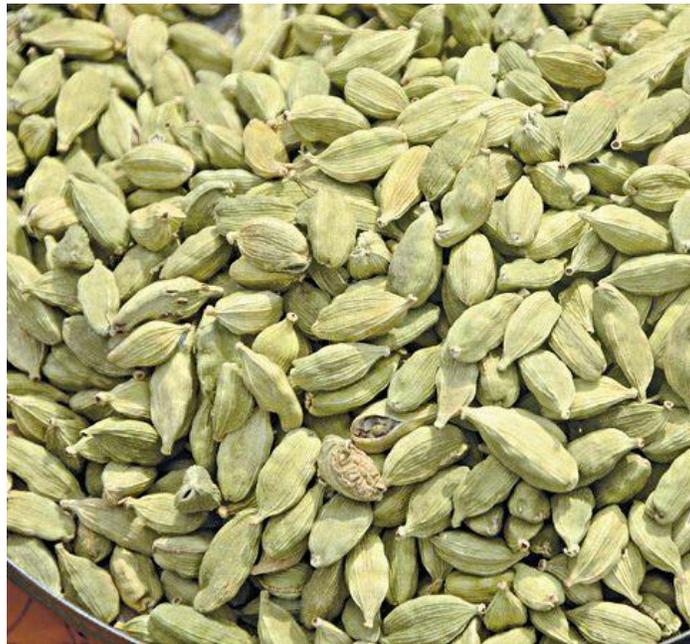
However, soft oils imports sharply increased to 2,129,557 tonnes as against 1,399,223 tonnes reported last year.

Meanwhile, the import of non-edible oils during the period under review stood at 35,458 tonnes as compared to 92,278 tonnes in the same period last year, down by 62 per cent.

On the stock condition, the association said the total stock at ports and in pipelines decreased to 2,360,000 tonnes from 2,455,000 tonnes in February 2016. India's monthly requirement is about 16.5 lakh tonnes and operates at 30 days stock against which the currently holding stock of over 23.60 lakh tonnes equals 43 days' requirement.

As on March 1, 2016, the overall stock had increased by 350,000 tonnes as compared to March 1, 2015, it said.

Cardamom loses aroma as arrivals surge



A downtrend continued in small cardamom pushing the prices to below ₹500 a kg last week on persistent upsurge in arrivals at the auctions held in Kerala and Tamil Nadu.

Those who have been holding stocks on the anticipation that the prices would improve were releasing their produce now apprehending further

decline in the prices, PC Punnoose, General Manger, CPMC, Kumily, told *BusinessLine*.

Buyers were staying away from the declining market looking at the heavy arrivals even at this time of the season when the harvesting of the current season is almost over.

Material arriving is inferior in quality and in large volumes because of the “bumper crop” and that in turn is aiding the price fall, market sources in Bodinayakannur said. Exporters have also slowed down saying the dealers in overseas markets in West Asia, mainly Saudi Arabia, are holding good stocks and hence they were not placing any fresh orders. Exporters have bought an estimated 30 tonnes last week.

They said the peak demand season is three months from September to November when all the buyers used to cover actively.

The prices would also remain moderate at this time of the season because of good green colour, freshness and bold size of the capsules, they said.

The trade estimates have put the total output during the current season at around 35,000 tonnes given the continued rise in arrivals.

Total arrivals last week stood at around 710 tonnes against 755 tonnes the previous week.

The individual auction average slipped to below ₹490 a kg and was vacillating between ₹490 and ₹558.

At the auction on Monday in Bodinayakannur by the Cardamom Planters’ Association – Santhanpara, arrivals were at 40.3 tonnes and the almost the entire quantity was traded.

The auction average improved to ₹528.25 from ₹499.57 the previous Monday, they said.

Total arrivals during the season up to March 12 were at around 23,440 tonnes and sales were at 22,580 tonnes.

The individual auction average as on March 12 stood at ₹602.96.

Prices of graded varieties (₹/kg): 8mm bold good colour 860-925; 7-8 mm 670-700; 6-7 mm 550-600; below 6 mm: 500-525.

Turmeric gleams on demand



Spot turmeric prices at Erode markets increased on Monday owing to upcountry demand. “The arrival of turmeric was very limited at 6,000 bags. The traders procured all the 3,000 bags of new turmeric and 200 and odd bags of hybrid turmeric and about 1,000 bags of old turmeric. The price of the finger turmeric and root turmeric were up ₹300 and ₹200 a quintal respectively. At the Erode Turmeric Merchants Association, the finger variety went for ₹8,416-10,100 and the root variety ₹7,459-9,499. Of the 2,013 bags offered, 1,400 were sold.

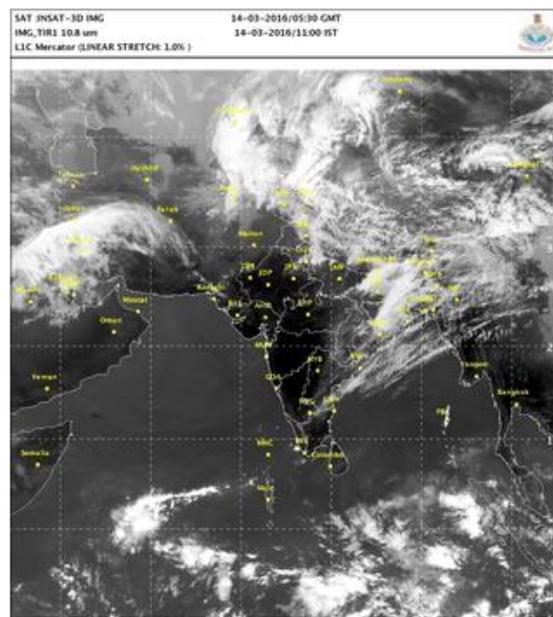
Prices drop at Coonoor tea auction

After ruling above ₹100/kg for six consecutive weeks (for the first time since 2013), average prices slipped to ₹94.73 at Sale No: 10 of Coonoor Tea Trade Association auction. Even at this fall, there were no takers for 22 per cent of the 12.40 lakh kg on offer because of slack demand. Homedale Estate’s Broken Pekoe, auctioned by Global Tea Brokers, topped the leaf and the entire CTC market when Belmont Tea and Produce Co bought it for ₹195/kg. In the orthodox tea market, Kodanad topped at ₹264 a kg.

Quotations held by brokers indicated bids ranging ₹62-70 per kg for plain leaf grades and ₹120-160 for brighter liquoring sorts. They ranged ₹82-87 for plain dusts and ₹130-170 for brighter liquoring dusts.



Spotty showers over North-West may last beyond a week



The heavy rain and thundershowers belt is now moving into East and North-East India, with Arunachal Pradesh expected to be affected the most today.

Thunderstorms accompanied by squall/ hail are likely over East Uttar Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Bihar, Odisha, hills of West Bengal and Sikkim.

Thunderstorms accompanied by squall are also likely at Assam, Meghalaya, Nagaland, Manipur, Mizoram and Tripura, according to an outlook by the India Met Department.

Tomorrow, thunderstorms accompanied by squall will canter into Odisha, Telangana and coastal Andhra Pradesh, apart from the familiar terrain over East and North-East India.

FRESH DISTURBANCE

Meanwhile, a fresh western disturbance entering North-West India by Wednesday would trigger fresh rain and snow over the Western Himalayas, the Met said.

Thunderstorms accompanied by squall/ hail would roll out across the plains including Punjab, Haryana, Delhi, Chandigarh and North Rajasthan.

According to an outlook of the US Climate Prediction Centre, the occasional rain/ thundershower regime will persist over Jammu and Kashmir, Punjab, Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand until March 25.

In the South, parts of Kerala and coastal Karnataka will continue to witness occasional showers until the end of the month.

Business Standard

Surinder Sud: A silent horticulture 'revolution'

Technology-led gains in the productivity of horticultural crops have allowed farmers to diversify

While the breakthroughs in the production of foodgrains and milk have been well acknowledged as "green" and "white" revolutions, an equally impressive feat in horticulture has gone, by and large, unnoticed. Not many people realise that the production of horticulture, including fruits and vegetables, is now larger than that of foodgrains. In the past one decade alone, horticultural output has surged by nearly 70 per cent - from around 167 million tonnes in 2004-05 to over 283 million tonnes in 2014-15. This is

significantly higher than the foodgrains output of 252.68 million tonnes (fourth advance estimates) for 2014-15.

More importantly, the technology-led gains in the productivity of horticultural crops have given the farmers an opportunity to diversify from food and other crops to horticulture. The two notable points here are that the small and marginal farmers have taken a lead in this direction and that a sizable chunk of land that has been brought under horticultural crops is irrigated. According to Agricultural Census 2010-11, over 87 per cent of the total vegetables and 90 per cent of fruits are grown by small landholders. This could be because the cultivation of horticultural crops, particularly vegetables, is highly labour-intensive and, therefore, suits small cultivators who can manage it largely with family labour. Nearly 73 per cent of land producing the eight main vegetables (onion, potato, tomato, okra, cauliflower, cabbage, brinjal and tapioca) has access to irrigation.

The impact of irrigation, better agronomic practices and improved varieties is well reflected in the robust growth of horticultural output, which is estimated at around seven per cent a year in the past decade. The acreage under horticulture has also grown by around two per cent a year. Significantly, horticultural production has either continued to grow or dip only marginally even during bad monsoon years, including the drought years of 2004, 2009, 2014 and 2015. The overall share of horticulture in the agriculture sector's gross domestic product (agricultural GDP) has grown to over 30 per cent even though it accounts for only 17 per cent of farm land.

That said, the truth also is that the horticulture sector could have done even better but for several formidable constraints that have yet to be addressed. The most significant among these is the lack of market support and paucity of post-harvest produce management chain from farm to fork. Most growers do not get reasonable returns for their produce though consumer prices remain high due to multiplicity of intermediaries in horticultural marketing. Distress sales and mass destruction of the produce in a bid to contain losses are not uncommon in this sector. There are instances where the producers do not turn up to reclaim their stocks kept in cold stores because the charges to be paid would exceed the realisation from the sale of the stocks. Besides, a sizable part of horticultural output is wasted due to improper post-harvest handling and want of processing facilities.

Since modern horticulture requires investments in micro-irrigation systems, construction of green houses and grading and packaging of the produce, it needs to get better access to cheap institutional finance and adequate marketing support. Expansion of the fruits and vegetable processing industry with backwards linkages with farmers can help in value-addition and waste reduction of the horticultural produce, thus, ensuring higher returns to growers. The recently created price stabilisation fund can and, in fact, should be used to prevent wide price fluctuations which often hurt both producers and consumers.

Though fruit crops, most of which are perennial in nature, cannot quickly respond to demand and price signals, vegetables, being short-duration crops, can do so. But this also is not happening, not even in the case of mass consumed items like onion, potato and tomato. This is because the benefits of high prices do not generally accrue to the growers. These are usually cornered by the middlemen. If these aspects are taken care of, the horticultural sector would be in a better position to meet the fast growing and rapidly changing needs and preferences of the consumers.

Rains damaged wheat crop in parts of Punjab, Haryana: Govt

However, no damage to mustard and gram crops has been reported so far



File photo of a harvester at work in a wheat field in Amritsar (Photo: PTI)

Unseasonal rains and hailstorm in the past few days have damaged wheat crop in some parts of Punjab as well as Haryana and the Centre is closely monitoring the situation, a top official said today.

"The rains and hailstorm in some districts of Punjab and Haryana has caused damage to the wheat crop. The strong wind and rains have flattened the standing wheat crop in some places," Agriculture Secretary Shobhana K Pattanayak told PTI.

No damage to mustard and gram crops has been reported so far. However, the extent of loss to wheat and other rabi crops is being assessed by state governments, which are yet to submit the complete report, he said.

With the Met Department forecasting more rains this week, the Secretary said, the Centre issued crop advisories three days ago to state governments and is keeping a close watch on the situation.

Asked if there was any damage to horticulture crops, Pattanayak said mango crop was affected to some extent due to rains in Maharashtra in the previous week but not this week.

The current spell of rains is beneficial for late-sown crops provided there is no wind or hailstorm, he added.

On mustard crop, ICAR Deputy Director General (crops) J S Sandhu said there is "no cause of concern as of now" as 60-70 per cent of the crop has been harvested. In case of wheat, harvesting has just begun in Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat and Rajasthan.

"If heavy spell of rains or hailstorm occur in the coming days, similar to what had happened in the last year, then it would be a cause of worry," Sandhu said.

Last year, unseasonal rains and hailstorm during March- April period had damaged the wheat crop significantly, resulting in sharp fall in production by 9.32 million tonnes. The quality of wheat was also hit forcing the government to relax norms for procurement of the grain from farmers for the central pool.

Wheat output is estimated to rise to 93.82 million tonnes in the 2015-16 crop year (July-June), as against 86.53 million tonnes in the previous year, despite drought.


THE TIMES OF INDIA

Salmon farmers' shares rise as Chilean algal bloom boosts prices



NTIAGO: An algal bloom in Chile has killed up to 20 percent of the nation's farmed salmon which in turn has sent shares of producers higher as the reduced supply has lifted selling prices.

Over the last month and a half, salmon farmers in Chile, the second-largest global producer after Norway, have been hit by production losses of around 1,00,000 tonnes, worth some \$800 million, according to industry experts.

The drop in supply from Chile caused global prices last week to rise 25 percent to \$5 per pound in Miami, a reference market for the industry.

Between Thursday and Friday, Oslo-listed shares in Norway-based Marine Harvest, the world's largest salmon producer, climbed 8 percent. But shares in smaller Santiago-listed firms Australis Seafoods rose 37 percent, while Camanchaca and Multiexport Foods jumped around 30 percent.

Blumar and Invermar registered similar gains, while shares in AquaChile rose a more modest 7.5 percent.

On Monday, most stocks continued to rise, with Marine Harvest shares up nearly 4 percent and others up as much as 10 percent.

"It seems a little paradoxical, but this is tied directly to the strong rise in the salmon price at the international level," said Jorge Opasso, an analyst at Bice Inversiones.

Crop loss assessment survey starts after rain, hail hit region

After heavy rainfall and hailstorms across the region over the weekend, the district administration on Monday began a survey to assess the damage suffered by crops. According to an agriculture department official, an estimated 15-25% crops have been damaged, which include all types of standing crops except sugarcane.

"The rainfall and hailstorms, which continued from Friday evening to Monday morning, have caused a lot of damage. We had been waiting for the weather to clear before starting a survey to assess the damage done to the crops but from what we have seen so far, the damage is substantial. On Monday, we started the process for the survey. Within two to three days, we will have a clear idea of the damage," said Meerut district agriculture officer Jasvir Singh.

"All major standing crops, except sugarcane, suffered some damage. This includes not just wheat, but also mustard, pulses and potato. As far as wheat is concerned, farmers who started sowing wheat early in October last year would have suffered the biggest losses since the crop was close to being ready for harvest. Those farmers who started sowing their wheat crop later in the crop cycle will be at an advantage. Their crop may have been saved," Singh added.

Talking about the extent of damage, Singh said, "So far, we do not have a clear picture. However, seeing the extent of damage, I think the district may have suffered anywhere between 15% to 25% damage in the weekend rains. By the end of this week, the survey will be complete. The agriculture

department will approach the additional district magistrate (finance) for the survey as well."

Heavy rain and hailstorms lashed at least eight wheat-growing districts of western UP, which saw massive destruction of crops in the same period last year due to unseasonal showers and hail. Scarred by last years' experience, farmers have called for a large-scale survey to assess crop damage and demanded that immediate compensation be given to those who may have suffered losses. Apart from wheat, standing crops of mustard and pulses were also damaged.

Meerut, Bijnor, Muzaffarnagar, Shamli, Baghpat, Saharanpur, Ghaziabad and Hapur districts saw heavy rainfall. Meerut city recorded 2.1 mm rainfall. Bijnor was among the worst hit districts on Saturday with 8 mm rainfall. The showers and hail began on Friday evening and the weather cleared only by Monday morning. After rain on Saturday night, mango growers too suffered losses, along with wheat farmers. Close to 15% of the tender *bohar* flower, which bears the mango fruit, was said to be damaged in the rain and hailstorm.

Crop loans surge in the time of drought

Repeated losses in farms because of last year's weak rainfall and the ensuing drought-like conditions have compelled farmers to go for more crop loans.

Data released by the district-level consultative committee revealed that the banks' performance in crop loan distribution has jumped 26% t in the third quarter this year (2015-16) as compared to the same period last year (2014-15).

The committee, chaired by the district collector, found that the actual performance in terms of loan disbursement by both public and private sector banks stood at Rs 2,184.05 crore. "This was much better than the show by all banks last year. While the performance exceeded by 4% of the target for the quarter this year (Rs 2,089.87 crore by the third quarter of this financial year), but it exceeded 25.86% same period last year (Rs 1,735.20 crore crop loan given)," a senior official in the collectorate said.

Referring to the rise in the crop loans even as it rained much less last year

than the preceding fiscal year Bank of Maharashtra manager Ashok Chavan said, "The gritty farmers went on to do whatever they could to ensure water availability on and below the surface to get the maximum output under the prevailing circumstances."

He added, "The banks' annual target was increased by 9% for crop loans during the 2015-16 credit plan as against the preceding year. The performance of both the government and private banks was good. We could pump in as much money possible in the agriculture sector, providing the farmers an opportunity to perform better in the situation."

The comparative figures show that the crop loan component had absorbed all growths in the district credit plan till December 2015 as compared to the corresponding period last year. At the same time, the loans for the allied activities dropped by 44% than last year. Loans for other activities in the non-priority sector dipped by 18% as compared to the last year.

A senior officer from another public sector undertaking bank, however, raised the doubt over the recovery of the loans. "Recovery is a big challenge ahead given the drought and other factors. The year 2014 witnessed around 85% of rainfall and it came down to 65% the following year. Besides, the rain was inconsistent. It is good that the banks are pumping in huge amounts. But the recovery remains a major concern for these banks with the government not taking prompt decisions," the banker said.

Girdhar Patil, an expert on farmers' policies, doesn't agree though. "The rise in the crop loans is an eyewash as the banks cleared the earlier loans. The crop loans are partially restructured and the rest of the amount is transferred into new loans for a new tenure with a top of the amount still required. In the current case, the rise in the loan is because of the rise in input costs and conversion of some loans into new ones. The recovery in terms of crop either gets converted into the term loans or in the fresh cash-credit loan," he said.

As far as block-wise distribution of agriculture loans is concerned, Nashik block or taluka sported negative growth. Loans disbursed till December 2015 stood at Rs 2,736 crore as against Rs 2,987 crore during the same period last year. The entire deficit was, however, absorbed by the neighbouring Niphad taluka that witnessed rise in disbursement by Rs

192.54 core. These figures are progressive and are further likely to change by the end of March this year.

THE ECONOMIC TIMES

Here's why the new crop insurance scheme's success pivots around supporting infrastructure

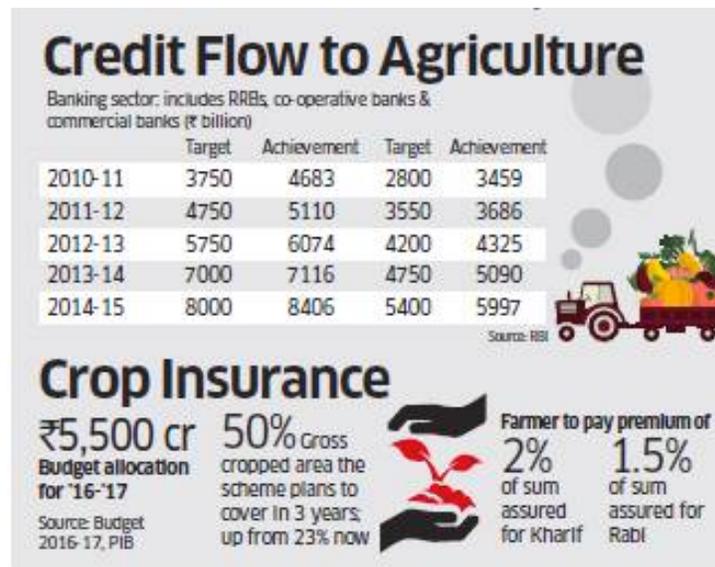


Sometime in the next few weeks, farmers in Madhya Pradesh or Rajasthan may find drones circling their fields. These drones would likely be flown by insurance companies as part of surveying standing crops.

"The litmus test of effective crop insurance is how quickly assessment is done and claims settled," says Ashok Gulati, Infosys chair professor at the Indian Council for Research on International Economic Relations. Government funded crop insurance has been around in the country for more than 30 years but despite it changing avatars twice, has hardly been effective. Majority of Indian farmers are small and marginal and cannot afford expensive insurance. They also do not get reliable information on new technologies, weather and prices, making it difficult for them to plan production.

In March-April 2015, rogue weather destroyed crops across large swathes of

northern and western India. The government had to raise the compensation, which was capped at Rs 4,500 per hectare for dry land and Rs 9,000 per hectare for irrigated land, to Rs 6,750 for dry and Rs 13,500 per hectare for irrigated land respectively. That was hardly enough. In Haryana, for instance, the average wheat yield is about 4.7 tonnes per hectare, the value of which had then worked out to about Rs 60,000. A farmer would have typically spent Rs 30,000 per hectare but got a compensation of only Rs 13,500 per hectare.



Besides, assessment and claim settlement is a cumbersome, time-consuming process. Minister Jaitley has now set aside Rs 5,500 crore in the Budget for crop insurance. In January, the government had announced the new insurance scheme Pradhan Mantri Fasal Bima Yojana with ultra low premiums. Farmers have to pay just 2% of the actuarial premium during Kharif season and 1.5% during Rabi season. Commercial and horticultural crop farmers will pay 5%.

Gulati says for the crop insurance to work well the government will need to quickly set up supporting infrastructure. It needs to have weather stations in every block, use drones to assess damage and low-earth orbit satellites, or LEOs, to geo-tag plots to identify farmers. He says India needs LEOs that more frequently monitor a point on earth compared to the remote-sensing satellites the country owns now. China launched over a hundred LEOs in 2014. Drones and LEOs are a globally mushrooming industry, Gulati says.

With all this in place, if, say, a hailstorm flattens crop in a district in Madhya Pradesh, the satellites could pin-point the plots and the geo-tags could identify the owner of the land. The weather stations would have already reported the hailstorm and drones would assess the damage more closely. The data is enough to make a quick assessment and the insurer can identify the farmer with the geo-tag and pay the claim directly into her Aadhar-linked bank account.

Gulati says if the government puts its might behind implementing the scheme, the infrastructure could be in place in six months. But with business as usual, it could take at least two years.

Indian agriculture has potential to grow at 5%: Dr Ashok Gulati



Indian agriculture has the potential to grow at 5 per cent per annum, while the present growth rate varied from 3.6 per cent to 4 per cent per annum, noted agriculturist Dr Ashok Gulati said.

BHUBANESWAR: Indian agriculture has the potential to grow at 5 per cent per annum, while the present growth rate varied from 3.6 per cent to 4 per cent per annum, noted agriculturist Dr Ashok Gulati today said.

"The Indian agriculture has the potential to grow at 5 per cent per annum in the present context against which the present growth rate varied from 3.6 per cent to 4 per cent per annum in real terms," Gulati said while addressing the Odisha Knowledge Hub (OKH) lecture series here.

While elaborating the link between agriculture growth and poverty reduction in national and international contexts, Gulati said higher growth rate in agriculture leads to faster rate of poverty reduction.

Comparing the nation's economy with a pyramid, he suggested putting agriculture sector at the base, manufacturing at the middle and service sector at the top. Such an approach, he maintained, would lead to sustainable development.

Though agriculture is a state subject, Central government needed to trigger and engineer the reform agenda in agriculture sector, he said.

Gulati cited the example of the impact of centrally engineered Green and White revolution on Indian economy and advocated for centrally sponsored active agenda for reform in this basic sector of the economy that cater to the food and nutrition security.

For Odisha, Gulati pointed out that frequent natural calamities and erratic rains are main factors responsible for slow agricultural growth rate in the state.

He suggested to focus on infrastructural development like irrigation, rural roads, more power to agriculture sector and establishment of value chain for cereal and fruit-products in the state for achieving higher growth rate in agriculture.

The lecture series is being conducted in Odisha to update the state functionaries with the newly emerging ideas and best practices at the national and international levels in the matters of public policy and developmental administration.

Finance Minister Pradip Kumar Amat, Agriculture Minister Pradeep Maharathy, Panchayati Raj minister Arun Kumar Sahoo, IT minister Pranab Prakash Das, Planning & Convergence minister Usha Devi, ST & SC Development Minister Lal Bihari Himirika and others attended the lecture.

29.95 lakh tonnes of sugar worth \$194 million exported in April-January period



"At present, export of sugar is free without any restriction. The government is not promoting its export with a view to expand sugar mills in the country," Commerce and Industry Minister Nirmala Sitharaman said.

NEW DELHI: India has exported 29.95 lakh tonnes (LT) of sugar during the first ten months of the current fiscal that is valued at \$194 million, Parliament was informed today.

The country had exported 19.55 LT of sugar in 2014-15 fiscal valued at \$103.93 million.

"At present, export of sugar is free without any restriction. The government is not promoting its export with a view to expand sugar mills in the country," Commerce and Industry Minister Nirmala Sitharaman said in a written reply to Parliament.

However, with a view to reduce the inventory pressure on domestic sugar prices, the government has fixed Minimum Indicative Export Quota (MIEQ) for each mill for sugar season 2015-16 so as to evacuate surplus stocks, she said.

The minister also informed that the Indian Missions located in target countries have been requested to pursue various trade opportunities with a view to evacuate surplus sugar.

Trade delegations have also been mounted to some of the important destination countries, she said.

According to industry body Indian Sugar Mills Association (ISMA), the country's sugar production rose 2 per cent to 19.94 million tonnes(MT) during the first five months of the current marketing year (October-September).

Sugar output of India, the world's second-largest producer and biggest consumer, is estimated to decline to 26 MT in 2015-16 marketing year as against 28.3 MT in the previous year due to deficit rains.

The United Planters' Association of Southern India calls for declaration of national rubber policy



Growers are steadily abandoning tapping and the tapping area on the total area has touched an ominous level of 56%.

KOCHI: The United Planters' Association of Southern India (Upasi) wants immediate declaration of national rubber policy to correct imbalances in the rubber industry as it expects the natural rubber production to drop to 5.6 lakh tonnes from 6.4 lakh tonnes last fiscal and the imports to touch 4.6 lakh tonnes from 4.4 lakh tonnes a year ago.

Upasi president N Dharmaraj said the policy frame work should address such issues as, grade wise production and import targets, and what is a sustainable price. At the recently concluded India Rubber Meet in Goa, he said the national rubber production and productivity have been steadily

coming down while the imports have been mounting. The consumption has marginally gone up and is expected to hover around 10 lakh tonnes this fiscal.

Imports at levels higher than the gap between production and consumption, indicate that tyre manufacturers, apparently are holding inventories, making use of the prevailing low prices. The consuming industry has built additional capacity propelled by attractive margins, and with production dwindling, these capacities will continue to be underutilised.

Low prices have brought misery to the 1.2 million growers. Growers are steadily abandoning tapping and the tapping area on the total area has touched an ominous level of 56%. Strategically this portends trouble for Indian rubber industry, Dharmaraj added.

Tyre companies increasingly favour technically specified rubber (TSR) because of its lower price instead of superior quality sheet rubber produced here. The production of TSR in the country is only 14%, whilst the imports of this grade is 70% of total imports.

Prime Minister Crop Insurance scheme to be implemented from April 1 in Maharashtra



Khadse said that in the crop insurance compensation scheme, the Centre has now included all types of crops.

MUMBAI: Maharashtra government will begin implementation of the Prime Minister Fasal Bima Yojana (PMFBY) from April 1, the Legislative Council was told today.

Replying to a debate on a question raised by Narendra Patil (NCP), state's Revenue minister Eknath Khadse said that compensation worth Rs 2,000 crore, which include 45 per cent share of Centre and state government and 10 per cent by farmers, will be disbursed.

"This measure will incur an additional burden of Rs 200 crore on the state exchequer," he said.

Replying to supplementary queries, Khadse blamed the meager compensation given earlier for select crops to flawed compensation norms decided by the previous Congress-NCP government, which evoked strong reactions from the Opposition.

Khadse said that in the crop insurance compensation scheme, the Centre has now included all types of crops.

"Damages to crops in post harvesting, cutting and harvesting, storm, unseasonal rains, flooding of fields, landslides and hailstorms have been included in the norms for granting compensation under the scheme," he said.

He further said the premium share for the farmers has been reduced so as to give enhanced compensation to more farmers.

Earlier, replying to the debate, Minister of State for Agriculture Ram Shinde assured the House that action shall be taken against those Revenue officials in western Maharashtra, who, without making field visits, prepared reports of no damage being reported in their respective region.

Vegetable oil import up 28% at 11 lakh tonnes in February: Industry body SEA



During November-February, palm oil import has marginally increased to 29,60,002 tonnes from 28,03,942 tonnes during the same period of last year.

NEW DELHI: Country's vegetable oils import rose by 28 per cent to 11.10 lakh tonnes last month due to higher shipments of refined plamolein on low global prices, according to industry body SEA.

"Import of vegetable oils during February 2016 is reported at 11,10,916 tonnes compared to 868,167 tonnes in February, 2015," Solvent Extractors' Association of India (SEA) said in a statement.

During November-February period of the current 2015-16 oil year, the import of vegetable oils (comprising edible and non-edible oils) increased by 19 per cent to 51,25,017 tonnes as compared to 42,95,443 tonnes in the corresponding period of the previous year, it said.

Import of refined oil (RBD Palmolein) jumped to 7,89,062 tonnes during November 2015 to February 2016 period from 253,780 tonnes in the same period of last year. Crude oil import marginally increased to 43,00,497 tonnes from 39,49,385 tonnes during the same period of last year.

During November-February, palm oil import has marginally increased to 29,60,002 tonnes from 28,03,942 tonnes during the same period of last year.

However, soft oils import sharply increased to 21,29,557 tonnes from 13,99,223 tonnes last year.

"The share of soft oils import increased to 42 per cent from 33 per cent last year while share of palm oil products down to 58% from 67 per cent," the statement said.

Import of non-edible oils fell by 62 per cent at 35,458 tonnes in the first four months of the last year as compared to 92,278 tonnes in the same period last year.

"In last one year, CIF Indian port prices of edible oils moved downward (except crude sunflower oil) in line with fall in international prices. RBD Palmolein price is down by USD 56 (-8 per cent), crude palm oil by \$49 (-7 per cent) and Crude soybean oil by \$58 (-7 per cent). In last one year rupee has depreciated by 10 per cent," SEA said.