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THE HINDU

‘Crop insurance scheme needs modification’

‘Insurance companies compensated the loss only to the extent of Rs. 460 crore over the last five years, far less than the premium paid’

Crop insurance scheme has failed to deliver over the years, and unless it is modified to assess each farmer’s loss individually and crop-wise as per the survey numbers, the situation will not improve, Minister for Agriculture and Cooperation Pocharam Srinivas Reddy pointed out.

In his reply on Wednesday in the State Legislative Assembly during a short discussion on drought conditions, Mr. Reddy said insurance companies compensated the loss only to the extent of Rs. 460 crore over the last five years, which was far less than even the premium paid.

Between 2010 and 2015, crop in a total of 69.61 lakh acres was insured for a sum of Rs. 19,617 crore, but the claims realised hardly matched the amount. Resolutions were sent to the Centre from both the Assembly and the Council, for modification of rules for the claims, but the new policy too doesn’t offer individual assessment, Mr. Reddy said. Irrigation projects alone can offer a lasting solution to farm distress, considering the one crore acres of fallow cultivable land in the State for lack of any irrigation facility, he said. Minister for Panchayat Raj K.T. Rama Rao said the government was adopting various short-term, medium-term and long-term measures to address the agricultural crisis. He named soil and water conservation as medium and Mission Bhageeratha, Mission Kakatiya and Haritha Haram as long term ones.

BARC's black gram seeds a hit among farmers

TU-40 variety not only resists yellow mosaic virus but gives more yield



Successful field demo of BARC's black gram Trombay variety TU-40 in Villupuram district.— Photo: Special Arrangement

Impressed by the resistance of TU- 40 variety of black gram (urad dhal) more farmers want the seeds. The Agriculture department had procured variety of seeds from the Bhabha Atomic Research Centre, Trombay, that are resistant to the yellow mosaic virus (YMV) and had given it to a few farmers so that they can be sown and more seeds produced.

Farmer G. Bhaskaran of Sozhampoondi village in Villupuram district, who got five kilos of the BARC variant, said that not even one plant got the bug that the crop is notorious for. "I had planted *Vamban* – 5 in the adjacent field and even though a few plants in that crop had been attacked by the virus, not even one in this BARC variety was infected. And the plus point was that I got more yield. From the *Vamban* variety I got 370 kg in 70 cents of land. I got the same quantity from TU- 40 sown in 50 cents," he said.

Though he and his neighbours were sceptical when they first sowed the seeds, they were doubly happy with the harvest. Now around 360 kilos of *urad dhal* have been given back to the department so that it can be used as

seed. Around 18 hectares could be cultivated using this quantity, explained an official in the agriculture department.

The YMV is a huge problem when it comes to *urad dhal* and many times, even up to 50 per cent of the crop has been damaged. “The virus does not allow the pod to form. We can only prevent the spread of the bug but not repair damage it causes. This variety also seemed to be water resistant. The crop stood in water for over two weeks but managed to give such a good harvest,” said another farmer.

The seed had been earlier tried out in Tirunelveli district and there too the harvest was very good. “The farmers were impressed by the yield of the plants and their resistance to the bug. We will now cultivate these seeds and get more seeds and then take them to more villages. Along with eliminating the bug, it will help increase pulse production,” explained an official of the agriculture department.

Sources in the BARC said the TU-94-2 variety had been released and notified for Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Kerala and Karnataka. The plant grows like a creeper and farmers in other States have been using the seeds for over a decade now.

“Vamban variety gives 370 kg in 70 cents of land but TU- 40 gives the same quantity in 50 cents”

Follow summer schedule, poultry farmers told

Poultry farmers should continue to provide cold water with balanced amino acids and electrolytes in the feed despite expected drop in temperature over the next three days.

A press release from Agromet Field Unit of Veterinary College and Research Institute and Regional Meteorological Centre, Chennai, said that the sky will be slightly cloudy, and will remain dry.

The maximum and minimum temperatures will respectively be 38 degree Celsius and 26 degree Celsius. The wind speed will be around 6 km an hour, mostly from southeast.

The maximum temperature during day time will go down by 2 to 3 degree Celsius. There will not be heat stress and heat stroke that was experienced in the last week. The slightly increased cloud activity and high winds in the evening will ensure low heat stress to the birds and other livestock.

Water level depleting rapidly in Almatti dam

The storage is 20.973 tmcft now against the full capacity of 123 tmcft



Following the rapid depletion of water, the district administration of Vijayapura and Bagalkot have appealed to the people to use water optimally.
—Photo: Rajendra Singh Hajeri

Water level in the Almatti dam is coming down rapidly in the wake of the rising mercury levels in the district.

According to officials of Krishna Bhagya Jal Nigam Ltd., the rate of evaporation is around 700 cusecs per day. This year, in March itself, the temperature in the district has been hovering between 38 degrees Celsius and 39 degrees Celsius which is only going to go up in April and May.

The officials said that the storage in the dam is 20.973 tmcft now. It was 23.539 tmcft at the same time last year. The water level is 507.88 metres

now. The full-reservoir level is 519 metres while the total storage capacity is 123 tmcft.

Following the rapid depletion of water, the district administrations of Vijayapura and Bagalkot have appealed to the people to use water optimally. Officials of these districts have launched a drive to disconnect illegal pipelines and seize pumpsets that are illegally drawing water from the dam.

The government has instructed farmers not to use the water for irrigation as the priority is for drinking water.

“We have to manage with the available water for drinking till June. We have asked farmers not to draw water for their fields from the dam,” Deputy Commissioner D. Randeep said.

The district administration believes that the drinking water crisis will only aggravate if the district failed to receive rain. The current storage of water could barely last till June. Meanwhile, some farmers have urged the government not to supply water to any industries and thermal plants from the dam.

New plant species discovered

Two leading researchers in the field of botanical taxonomy in the State have reported the discovery of a rare plant species from the Pottumala region of the Nelliampathy forests in the Western Ghats.

Researchers Soumya Murugan from Thiruvananthapuram and Maya C. Nair, head of the department of Botany, Government Victoria College, Palakkad, have spotted the new plant species with botanical name *Sonerila nairii*, which comes under the family of *Melastomataceae*.

The discovery from biodiversity rich Nelliampathy has been published in the latest issue of *Phytotaxa*, an international journal on taxonomy. Interestingly, the researchers have named the plant as *Sonerila nairii* as a tribute to eminent botanist P.K.K. Nair, who founded Thiruvananthapuram-based Environmental Resources Research Centre. He had contributed

immensely to the field of Palynology, the study of plant pollen, spores and certain microscopic plankton organisms in both living and fossil form.

The plant with pink coloured flowers is a highly endangered species.

The plant was seen growing around 1,200 metres above sea level.

Each plant carries just two flowers.

The plant grows in soil found in the gaps of rocks.

“The plant species is enlisted in the critically endangered category of the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN). We spotted it while working on the flora of Kollengode range forests in Palakkad district,” said Ms. Murugan. “The plant species is lithophytic and flowers during the October-November months in climatic regions with altitudes ranging above 1,200 metres above sea level. Nelliampathy deserves more studies on taxonomy,” said Ms. Nair.

Despite rising heat, vegetable prices remain low

Heavy rainfall during last year's northeast monsoon is cited to be the reason for the good yield and low prices for two months now.

Every year in March, when the mercury begins to soar, prices of vegetables go up. This March, when residents of the city are already facing the effects of an unusually torrid summer, vegetable prices have not risen in the last two months. In other words, vegetables are surprisingly low-priced for this time of the year.

Traders at the Koyambedu wholesale market note that the cost of most staple vegetables is within Rs. 20 a kg. Some vegetables, including brinjals, are sold for less than Rs.10 at the wholesale market this summer.

This downward price trend is expected to continue for at least a fortnight as arrivals from the neighbouring States pour into the Koyambedu wholesale market, which is the hub of perishable goods in the city.



Vegetables are prices lower than March lat. Photo: B. Jothi Ramalingam

WHOLESALE PRICE IN KOYAMBEDU MARKET		
Vegetable	Mar 2016	Mar 2015
Onion	10-15	15-20
Drum stick	15	20
Tomato	7-10	13
Potato	13	17
Ladies Finger	8-10	15
Brinjal	6	10
Beans	25	30-35
Broad Beans	10-15	20
Green Peas	40	40
Carrot	15	25

Heavy rainfall during last year's northeast monsoon across Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh, from where the city receives its major share of vegetables, is cited to be the reason for the good yield and low prices for two months now.

Wholesale traders note that the prices of most vegetables are 15 per cent less compared to the same period last year.

Customers who buy from local markets and retail grocery stores get a better deal.

In places like Perambur, Ayanavaram and Anna Nagar, five kg of tomatoes are sold in vans at Rs.50.

Sivagami Babu, a resident of Anna Nagar, said: “I make vegetable soups every day and buy vegetables in bulk to make pickles. Tomatoes are priced at Rs. 8 per kg in our neighbourhood. I bought four kg of onions for Rs. 50. I spend only half of the usual weekly budget for vegetables and cut down on non-vegetarian dishes.”

Many like her have started visiting the Koyambedu market to purchase fresh vegetables and greens for a low price.

Residents like P. Rajeswari of Ashok Nagar also frequently check online grocery stores for offers to save some money. Raw mangoes have also started trickling in this summer from various places, including Tiruvallur, Tiruttani, Tirupattur and Salem.

P. Sukumar, vice-president of Koyambedu Vegetables, Fruits and Flowers Merchants Welfare Association, said, “We are getting up to 10 lorries, including some from Karnataka, bringing mangoes to Chennai every day. This is expected to double in April and the price will decrease by half. One kg of raw mangoes is sold for Rs.40 a kg now.”

However, prices are expected to increase by mid-April as yields may decrease then, say traders.

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Climate and agriculture: Will the rain gods finally smile on Bharat in 2016?

Right now, it's still early days; but latest global climate models hold out hopes of a normal — even if slightly delayed — southwest monsoon.



For the last two years, India has had deficient monsoon rainfall, resulting in drought in large swathes of the country.

In the last few weeks, the Marathwada region of Maharashtra, one of the worst drought affected in the country, has received fair amount of

precipitation. In fact, it has rained more than twice the normal average rainfall for the region in the month of March.

The rest of the country, too, has got more than the normal quota of rainfall this month. While these are extremely welcome rains, what is extremely crucial for agriculture and rural India, however, is a good rainfall during the main southwest monsoon season from June to September.

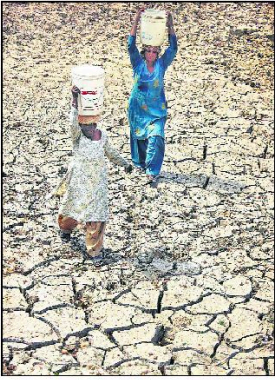
For the last two years, India has had deficient monsoon rainfall, resulting in drought in large swathes of the country. This year, even winter rains, triggered by the north-east monsoon, were absent. Virtually every month after June has seen deficient rainfall. There are indications now, though, that this spell of bad monsoon might just end this year.

The first forecast of the Indian Meteorological Department is still three weeks away, but two key indicators are showing signs of turning favourable in the next few days. The most important is the El Nino phenomenon which is known to suppress rainfall over the Indian region. El Nino — a reference to the unusual rise of sea surface temperatures in the equatorial Pacific Ocean, off the coast of Peru and Ecuador in South America — has been behind some of the worst droughts in recent decades, and was also blamed for the low rainfall last year.

The current spell of El Nino has been one of the longest and strongest of all time. But latest global climate models are showing that this has finally begun to weaken and is likely to enter “neutral” phase by May. What is more, there is a 50 per cent chance of a La Nina, the opposite of El Nino, developing by August. La Nina, the unusual cooling of the equatorial Pacific Ocean, is known to enhance rainfall activity during monsoon.

AREA WEIGHTED RAINFALL OVER INDIA AS A WHOLE (IN MM)			
Mon	Actual Rainfall	Normal Rainfall	Departure from normal(%)
June	190.1	163.6	16
July	241.0	289.2	-17
Aug	204.7	261.3	-22
Sept	131.4	173.4	-24
Oct	42.9	80.9	-47
Nov	40.0	29.7	35
Dec	15.1	16.6	-9
Jan 16	7.8	19.2	-59
Feb 16	10.1	22.2	-54
Mar16	25.0	22.1	13

(till 23)



“A strong El Nino is present and is weakening. Positive equatorial sea surface temperature anomalies continue across most of the Pacific Ocean. A transition to ENSO (El Nino southern oscillation) neutral is likely during late northern hemisphere spring or early summer 2016, with close to a 50 per cent chance for La Nina conditions to develop by the fall,” a bulletin issued by the Climate Prediction Centre of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Association of the United States said on Monday.

The Australian Bureau of Meteorology’s advisory released the next day, too, held that that the equatorial Pacific has been “coolest” since January 2015. “International climate models suggest El Nino will continue to weaken during the southern autumn, returning to neutral levels by mid-2016,” it said. Another indicator, the Indian Ocean Dipole (IOD), is also neutral right now.

The IOD is a phenomenon similar to El Nino and La Nina, though much closer home in the Indian Ocean. A positive IOD often neutralises the impact of El Nino and is known to induce rainfall over the Indian region. A weakening El Nino and neutral IOD does not necessarily mean good monsoon rainfall.

The IMD tracks five indicators to make its first forecast and another three for its second forecast that usually comes in the first week of June. These indicators have complex relationships with the monsoon rainfall.

Additionally, the El Nino has a delayed impact. Rainfall in June, the first of the four-month monsoon season, might still be adversely affected by the El Nino if it continues till May.”Although the 2015-16 El Nino is weakening, it will continue to influence climate during the southern hemisphere autumn,” the Australian bureau said.

The impact of two successive drought years has not been as debilitating for agriculture as would have been expected a few years ago, thanks to advance warning and timely planning. But the lack of rains have certainly taken a toll of water availability for irrigation, power generation and even drinking purposes.

Most of the reservoirs in the country are running way below their normal storage levels at this time of the year. In fact, some of them, including in Marathwada, have completely dried up. The 16 big and small reservoirs in the region together had only five per cent of their normal storage at the start of this week.

As on March 23, the 91 major reservoirs monitored by the Central Water Commission together had water that was only 26 per cent of their full capacity. The amount of water stored in these reservoirs was less than 70 per cent of what was stored at the same time last year, which itself was quite low. While agriculture’s prospects in 2016-17 will depend largely on the monsoon’s performance, right now meeting basic drinking water requirements till June is the biggest concern.

Drought in Maharashtra brings behatar din to UP sugar mills

State on course to become India’s No. 1 producer in 2016-17; finances of mills improve on higher price realisations.

Somebody’s loss is somebody else’s gain. This certainly holds true for sugar today where extreme drought has taken a heavy toll of Maharashtra’s production, even as millers in Uttar Pradesh (UP) seem set for behatar (better) if not acche (good) din after an extended period of gloom.

Sugar output in Maharashtra is likely to fall to around 83 lakh tonnes (lt) in the current 2015-16 season, from the all-time-high of 105.14 lt for 2014-15. Moreover, it may drop further to 60 lt “plus or minus 2.5 lt” in 2016-17, according to Sanjeev Babar, managing director, Maharashtra State Co-operative Sugar Factories Federation.

Lower plantings from dry weather in Maharashtra and Karnataka — which will impact cane availability even more in the ensuing season from October — is what’s been driving up sugar prices in recent months. Average ex-mill realisations have risen from Rs 26.30 per kg in October to Rs 32.50 this month in UP, while correspondingly going up from Rs 24.79 to Rs 30.50 in Maharashtra. On Wednesday, they ruled still higher at Rs 35 and Rs 33/kg respectively.

THE BIG-TWO SUGAR STATES				
Season (Oct-Sep)	Production (lakh tonnes)		Sugar recovery in %	
	Maharashtra	UP	Maharashtra	UP
2011-12	89.96	69.74	11.67	9.07
2012-13	79.87	74.85	11.41	9.18
2013-14	77.12	64.95	11.40	9.26
2014-15	105.14	70.90	11.30	9.55
2015-16*	80.57	64.88	11.23	10.57

*As on 28.03.2016.

The benefits of this will, however, go primarily to UP mills. They are expected to produce 70-71 lt of sugar this season, the same as in 2014-15 notwithstanding a decline in cane area from 21.47 lakh hectares (lh) to 20.52 lh. In 2016-17, UP may displace Maharashtra as the country’s top sugar producer, with output projected to cross 75 lt. Its mills, thus, stand to gain from both increased production and improved realisations — which might even help the ruling Samajwadi Party in time for the state elections due in May 2017.

Abinash Verma, director general, Indian Sugar Mills Association (ISMA), attributes UP’s robust production to two factors.

The first is favourable climatic conditions for higher sugar recovery from cane. Sugar accumulates in cane most when the gap between maximum and minimum temperatures is at least 50 per cent.

While the crop is in maturity phase, night temperatures should ideally not go below 15 degrees Celsius and day temperatures, too, must remain within 25-30 degrees. This optimal range is usually reached after mid-October till November-end.

But in sub-tropical northern India, including UP, the onset of peak winter from mid-December through January reduces sucrose accumulation. That is a key reason for sugar recovery in UP historically averaging 9-9.5 per cent of cane weight, as against roughly 11.5 per cent for Maharashtra and 12.5 per cent or more in the southern districts of Kolhapur and Sangli.

This time, though, the northern cane belt experienced ‘ideal’ climatic conditions similar to that in southern Maharashtra and northern Karnataka (Belgaum, Dharwad, Bagalkot and Bijapur). The winter was relatively mild, with temperatures not dropping too low.

This was accompanied by clear sunshine, thanks to no fog or cloud formation. Besides, dry weather and low humidity made the crop less vulnerable to pests (root borer, early shoot borer, top borer and pyrilla) and diseases (red rot, smut, wilt and grassy shoot disease).

“Even the poor monsoon helped this time, as there are many low-lying cane-growing areas in central and eastern UP — including Lakhimpur Kheri, Hardoi, Sitapur, Gonda and Basti — normally prone to water-logging,” notes Verma, while admitting that 2015-16 was a “one-off” year.

But a second, equally important, factor has been the spread in planting of new high-yielding varieties, especially Co 0238, Co 0239, Co 98014, CoLk 94184 and CoSe 01434.

Till 2012-13, these varieties, which also give higher sugar recoveries, weren't cultivated by farmers. But in the 2015-16 season, they together covered nearly 30 per cent of UP's cane area.

As a result, even with acreage falling by 3.71 lh or 15.3 per cent between 2012-13 and 2015-16, the state's sugar production has dropped only marginally from 74.85 lt to 70-71 lt: It is actually slated to rise to 75 lt in the 2016-17 season.

The most significant development during this period has been the increase in average sugar recovery — it is likely to be 10.6 per cent this season — even while dipping in Maharashtra.

“Nobody ever thought recovery rates in UP would cross double-digits. The credit goes partly to favourable weather, but mainly to the new varieties that give minimum 9.5 per cent recovery even for 10-month cane crushed in mid-November.

This minimum rises to 10.5 per cent for 11-month and 11 per cent for 12 month-cane,” says Narendra Singh, former cane development advisor at ISMA and now with Balrampur Chini Mills Ltd.

Singh, while in ISMA, played a major role in undertaking performance evaluation trials of the new cane varieties in 24 mills of UP, Bihar, Uttarakhand and Haryana during the 2007-08 to 2009-10 sugar seasons.

The effects can be seen even at mill level. Dwarikesh Sugar Industries estimates the average sugar recovery for its three mills at 11.60 per cent for 2015-16, up from 9.81 per cent in 2012-13.

“It will be 11.90 per cent at our Bundki (Najibabad) factory, where over two-thirds of the cane crushed is accounted for by the Co 0238 variety whose share will climb to 80 per cent in 2016-17,” claims Vijay S Banka, chief financial officer of the company.

Among individual mills, the highest cumulative average recovery for this season — crushing is almost coming to an end — has been recorded by the Seksaria Biswan factory at Sitapur (12.32 per cent). Balrampur Chini's Kumbhi (11.85 per cent) and Gularia (11.75 per cent) units in Lakhimpur Kheri have also registered impressive recoveries.

Improved realisations and recovery rates should also help UP's cane growers, who have since 2012-13 been receiving an unchanged Rs 280 per quintal state advised price (SAP).

Worse, mills haven't been able to pay even this rate: As on March 28, they owed growers Rs 267.56 crore out of the Rs 20,646.02 crore value of cane that was crushed in the previous 2014-15 season.

This is over and above the outstanding unpaid dues of Rs 4,033.60 crore for the current season. These arrears may well be cleared in the coming days as behatar din turn into acche din.



If there's one person to be credited no less for the UP sugar industry's turnaround in fortunes, it is Bakshi Ram, director of the Sugarcane Breeding Institute (SBI) at Coimbatore.

The 56-year-old has bred Co 0238, the wonder cane variety covering about 5.25 lakh hectares (lh) in the 2015-16 sugar season. That includes 4.03 lh in

UP, 0.60 lh Punjab, 0.36 lh in Haryana, 0.17 lh in Bihar and 0.08 lh in Uttarakhand.

Co 0238 has been a major contributor to sugar recovery from cane crushed by UP mills rising to an average 10.6 per cent this season, from 9.3 per cent over the preceding 10 years. The increase would be even more — between 1.5 to 2 percentage points — for factories where this variety constitutes a significant share of the total cane crushed.

A one percentage point rise in recovery rate isn't small. For mills in UP expected to crush roughly 670 lakh tonnes (lt) in 2015-16, it translates into 6.7 lt of additional sugar. That, at Rs 30 per kg, is worth Rs 2,010 crore.

But it isn't higher sugar recovery alone. Before Co 0238, the most widely cultivated cane variety, CoS 767, yielded 60-65 tonnes per hectare on most farmers' fields. Co 0238, by contrast, gives upwards of 75 tonnes, with many farmers harvesting 100 tonnes and more. Even taking a 10-15 tonnes yield gain, the extra income to the farmer, at the state advised price of Rs 280/quintal, works out to Rs 28,000-42,000 per hectare.

Bakshi Ram developed Co 0238 while heading SBI's regional station at Karnal. The variety was released in 2009. What makes Co 0238 different is that it is a 'medium-thick' variety. The average thickness of each cane stick is about 2.6 cm, going up to 3 cm. This was as opposed to the varieties hitherto grown in North India, which were all 'medium thin', ranging from 2 to 2.25 cm.

"I was clear from the start that cane yields in the North cannot go up without increasing thickness to the 2.5 cm levels of Maharashtra," recalls Bakshi Ram. This wasn't easy because higher yields by augmenting thickness also meant lower sugar recovery.

"Breaking this negative correlation and breeding a variety combining both high yields as well as recovery was a challenge. Further, the variety had to be resistant to red rot (a major fungal disease that drastically retards yields

and also juice content in the cane). The traditional medium-thin varieties are relatively red rot-resistant,” he points out.

Co 0238 achieved the seemingly impossible by combining high yields with high recovery, alongside resistance to red rot.

Moreover, it is early-maturing, attaining 18 per cent sucrose and 85 per cent juice purity even at 10 months. The last comparable variety North India had was Coj 64, released in 1977-78 and which farmers stopped growing after its susceptibility to red rot.

hindustantimes

Rajasthan: 411 villages suffer 50% crop damage



Farmers are covered under weather-based crop insurance schemes and modified national agriculture insurance scheme. (HT File photo)

Untimely rain and hailstorm resulted in over 50% crop loss in 411 villages of Rajasthan’s 14 districts, shows a crop assessment report.

The report, which assessed crop loss up to March 15, found that the unseasonal rain and hailstorm between March 2 and 11 affected 2,031 villages in 71 tehsils of 23 districts.

The worst affected district was Barmer, where over 50% crop loss was reported in 142 villages and up to 50% crop loss in 227 villages of four tehsils. Barmer district collector Sudheer Sharma said the assessment report was sent to the state government.

Hindustan Times has a copy of the assessment report that found 625 villages in nine districts suffered up to 50% crop loss and 995 villages in 19 districts suffered less than 33% crop loss.

In Barmer, which was worst hit in the hailstorm, 99 villages of Dhorimanna tehsil and 44 villages of Gudamalani tehsil reported over 50% crop loss, while 227 villages of four tehsils reported up to 50% crop loss.

Sri Ganganagar district was the second worst affect with 138 villages of four tehsils suffering over 50% crop loss, and 88 villages up to 50% crop loss.

In addition, 64 villages of Sri Ganganagar tehsil, 17 villages of Sri Karanpur tehsil, and eight villages of Sadul Sehar had less than 33% crop loss.

Farmers in the state are covered under weather-based crop insurance schemes and modified national agriculture insurance scheme, which were implemented in 20 and 13 districts respectively.

If farmers suffered crop damage up to 33%, they will be compensated under these two schemes. However, if the damage exceeds 33%, relief will be provided through the state disaster management department.

Coir exports set to exceed ast year's ₹1,630 crore



Shipments up 5.5% till January in current fiscal; Board eyes Australia to expand markets

The recessionary trends in the overseas markets seem to have not deterred coir exports from the country, as the sector continues to register a better performance in the last few consecutive years.

The coir sector has fetched an export revenue of ₹1,630 crore in the last fiscal against ₹1,476 crore achieved in the previous year.

However, the Coir Board is expecting that exports in the current fiscal will exceed the last year's levels as it already crossed ₹1,382 crore as on January, CP Radhakrishnan, the newly-appointed Chairman said. Coir exports during April-January period of current fiscal were up 5.5 per cent at ₹ 1,382 crore against corresponding last year's ₹ 1,310 crore.

With this growth momentum and improvement shown in the export front, the Board is looking at doubling the export revenue in three years by penetrating into new overseas markets.

New markets

Currently, China, Korea, Japan, Germany, Canada, US are the major markets for coir products and the Board is looking at exploring Australian market in a big way with value-added products, he said.

Based on the feedback received from exporters, Radhakrishnan also emphasised the need to modernise the industry to enhance the productivity as well as in ensuring uniformity of coir rolls in the export market.

Talks are on with leading spinning machinery manufacturers in India to develop new spindles to improve the productivity.

Mixed luck from Dragon

Speaking to reporters on Wednesday, he clarified that there is no scarcity or non-availability of raw material for value-added coir producing units. The current trend of coir fibre exports to China was not showing any substantial increase and this has resulted in sufficient availability in the domestic market.

The need is approximately one lakh tonnes and is met without any hassles.

Coir geo-textiles

According to him, coir geo-textiles has a huge requirement in roads construction and the Board has already laid 18 km of rural road network in Kerala using the material based on a study carried out by NIT, Kozhikode and College of Engineering, Thiruvananthapuram.

The potential of coir geo-textiles in road construction has already proved as there would be a 25 per cent saving in construction cost, besides increasing the durability of roads for five years.

The Board is in talks with NHAI seeking approval of using coir geo-textiles in the construction of national highways, he said adding that this would give tremendous boost to the coir industry.

Higher demand sweetens sugar



Sugar market ruled firm extending its bullish trend on back of firm mill tender rates amid higher physical demand.

On the Vashi market, prices went up by ₹10-20 a quintal at the higher side while ruled steady at the lower end. *Naka* rates were down by ₹20. Local dispatches came down as retail demand eased.

As bulk demand is expected to rise in the coming days, the bullish trend will continue. At Vashi market, arrivals declined to 60- 61 truck loads and local dispatches also eased to 58-60 loads. Freight rates were steady.

The Bombay Sugar Merchants Association's spot rates: S-grade ₹3,482-3,582 (3,482-3,572) and M-grade ₹3,542-3,672 (3,542-3,652). *Naka* delivery rates: S-grade ₹3,480-3,530 (3,480-3,550) and M-grade ₹3,550-3,630 (3,550-3,650).

Business Standard

Direct to minister

After Railway Minister Suresh Prabhu and External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj, Agriculture Minister Radha Mohan Singh seems to have joined the growing list of National Democratic Alliance ministers trying to reach out to the common man through social media platforms.

Singh heard the plight of one Sumit Dass from Keonjhar district in Odisha, who wanted to open a dairy project in his district but could not connect with either the local minister of agriculture or Singh.

Dass had applied online for subsidy under the Agriculture Policy of 2013. He tweeted his plight and tagged Singh's Twitter handle and was pleasantly surprised when the minister replied. Singh spoke to the state agriculture minister and some others to get the work done.



THE TIMES OF INDIA

Govt to distribute 25,000 cellphones among farmers

After a gap of around two years, the state government once again decided to distribute 25,000 mobiles among leading farmers of the state.

Earlier, 18,000 cell phones were distributed among leading farmers.

"We have floated a tender to procure 25,000 more mobiles that will be distributed very soon among farmers," cooperation minister Damodar Rout told the assembly in a written reply.

The objective behind the free mobile distribution scheme, launched in 2013, is to help farmers get market information related to agriculture



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Keeping in mind the 2014 general and assembly elections, the state government had distributed around 18,000 mobile phones to the farmers. There was, however, no distribution for two years (2014-15 and 2015-16).

The minister, in his reply, said so far the maximum number of mobile phones - 1,364 - have been distributed among the farmers of Sundargarh district, followed by 1,202 mobiles in Balasore district. Only 144 phones have been distributed among the farmers of Gajapati district, the lowest among all districts.

Congress leader Nabakishore Das, however, criticized the state government for trying to gain mileage by launching populist schemes. "Had the state government any intention to facilitate the farmer to get market info by providing mobiles, it would not have stopped the distribution for past two months," Das said.