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THE HINDU

Vanam-Manam: Forest Dept. to rope in Dwcra groups

As part of the ongoing Vanam-Manam programme in the State, forest officials are planning to utilise the services of Dwcra (Development of Women and Children in Rural Areas) groups in the district for achieving optimal results in social forestry.

Social Forestry Division officials led by Divisional Forest Officer G. Srinivasulu on Saturday conducted awareness camps, rallies, and plantation of saplings in Irala and Tirupati rural mandals.

Government officials, sarpanches, Dwcra groups, teachers, students and pilgrims bound for Tirumala and Kanipakam temples took part in the events.

Speaking to the media, Mr. Srinivasulu said that an action plan was ready to rope in the Dwcra groups in large numbers for success of the Vanam-Manam and other social forestry schemes.

He said that each woman member of the SHG should give her name, Aadhaar and contact numbers either to the Forest Department offices or the Mandal Parishad Development Officers and furnish details as to how many plants they could plant and maintain.

“Our field staff would process their requirement and provide the saplings at their doorstep. The Dwcra groups have proved their mettle in various constructive activities. Their cooperation and involvement in the social forestry schemes would definitely lead to excellent results. Their services would also be utilised for undertaking awareness camps in schools and rural areas about the importance of nature and wildlife, and their coexistence with mankind,” the DFO said.

The official said that the ‘geo-tagging’ of social forestry schemes would be implemented seriously.

Geo-tagging

"All the stakeholders, including officials, social groups and common people, would be provided a link connected to the Forest Department's website. They could operate either on behalf of their respective groups or individually. By periodically uploading the latest snaps of the saplings, it would be highly useful for identifying several other viral parameters such as groundwater table, climate and soil conditions. The geo-tagging will also help in monitoring the plantations and their survival aspects," Mr. Srinivasulu said.

The DFO said that so far 64 lakh plants, including premier varieties of red sanders and teak, were raised, and about 15 lakh plants distributed.

More water from Mettur Dam for Samba crop

Even as the storage in Mettur Dam depletes due to the drop in the realisation of water in River Cauvery, the Public Works Department increased the discharge of water from the dam for the ongoing Samba crop season in the Delta districts to 18,000 cusecs on Thursday morning.

About 12,000 cusecs was released since the sluices were opened for commencing farm activities in the Delta region on September 20. Even after three weeks of release of water from the dam, there were complaints from the Delta farmers that it had not reached the tail end areas.

P. R. Pandian, president of the All Farmers Associations Organisation Committee, complained to the high-level technical team constituted by the Supreme Court to assess the ground reality in the Cauvery basin in Karnataka and Tamil Nadu during its visit to Mettur Dam, about the water not reaching the tail end areas of the 12 Delta districts.

Farmers in these areas were waiting for water, after raising the nurseries. Water would not reach the tail end areas if the release was pegged continuously at 12,000 cusecs.

PWD sources said the increase in the release of water is to enable the water reach the tail-end areas. They said the discharge was increased to 14,000 cusecs at 6 a.m., to 16,000 cusecs at 8 a.m. and to 18,000 cusecs at 10 a.m.

The water level in the dam stood at 68.78 feet on Thursday against its full level of 120 ft and the storage was 31.663 tmc, against the dam's full capacity of 93.47 tmc. The dam was receiving 9,083 cusecs of water on Wednesday and it dropped to 6,237 cusecs on Thursday.

With water level in the dam fast depleting, the towers of the Church near the Pannavadi boat ghat started surfacing a few days ago. Meanwhile, with water level going below 69

feet mark, the Nandhi statue in the water spread area in Kaveripuram village has started surfacing.

14 agro parks to be set up

The government will establish 14 agricultural parks to manufacture value-added goods from different crops and tap the booming global market for agricultural produce.

Minister for Agriculture V.S. Sunil Kumar said here on Thursday that the agro parks would focus on value addition of coconut, paddy, rubber, spices, honey, and fruits. A Special Purpose Vehicle would be set up for the Rs.500-crore project.

The parks would function as facilitation centres for farm producer companies to manufacture a range of products.

The first such facility to produce goods from coconut would be set up in Kozhikode within a year.

The parks would provide producer companies with technology and infrastructure support to ensure the quality of products and packing, improve shelf life, manufacture by products and market the produce.

The idea, he said, was to take the Kerala brand to the global market and raise the domestic production to benefit farmers.

Awards announced

Mr. Kumar also announced the State-level awards for vegetable farming in different categories. The award for the best student initiative went to Sradha Mariya Saji, Thoprankudy, Idukki; with Arya Sarasan, Pavaratty; and K.H.Neelakanta Iyer, Mannar; bagging the second and third prizes. The award for the best teacher was bagged by Kunnumbron Rajan, Kuthuparamba HSS, Kannur.

KM HSS, Karulayi, Malappuram, won the award for the best initiative by a school and V. Rajesh, Headmaster, EMA LPS, Paravannur, was selected the best initiative by a head of an institution.

The Mar Baselios Christian College of Engineering and Technology, Pallikunnu, Idukki, won the award in the category of private educational institutions. The Community Health Centre, Chithirapuram, Idukki, was chosen the best government institution. Bakalam Vayal A grade cluster was chosen the best vegetable cluster.

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Is chini going to be the next dal?

Inflation worries have clearly receded in most food items — barring sugar, potatoes and chana. Even for the last two, the current high prices may be a temporary phenomenon, as the improved soil and sub-soil moisture conditions from a good monsoon is likely to spur plantings in the ensuing rabi season.

That leaves only sugar, where there is a problem of both tight domestic supplies as well as high international prices. This is unlike in wheat, for which the government's own precarious stocks position is more than offset by low global prices. At about $205 per tonne, the landed cost of imported wheat in India works out to Rs 1,365 a quintal — below even the minimum support price of Rs 1,525/quintal that was payable to farmers for last year's crop.

In sugar, on the other hand, the 2016-17 season (October-September) has started with estimated carryover stocks of 75 lakh tonnes (lt). With output projections for the new season ranging from 220 lt to 235 lt, and expected consumption of 260 lt, the closing stocks for September 2017 would be anywhere between 35 lt and 50 lt — not very comfortable.

Nutrient paradox

Sales of fertilisers have dipped, despite Krishi Bhawan's claim of a record kharif harvest this year on the back of a decent monsoon and also a decline in retail prices of decontrolled phosphatic, potassic and other complex nutrients. This could be a reflection of two things. The first is that the agriculture ministry's production estimates are themselves exaggerated. That possibility is, however, discounted by the fact that kharif acreages have gone up significantly over last year; the fact of a production increase is undeniable, even if the extent of it as per the official numbers can be questioned. It leaves a second possibility — of farmers actually applying less fertiliser. But even that may not be as straightforward. If farmers and dealers had stocks from the previous year's purchases — which couldn't get used because of drought — that pipeline material may well have got consumed this time. In other words, even if sales of fertiliser firms have fallen, farmers' consumption needn't have. As of now, we don't have data for the latter.

But even assuming farmers have, indeed, cut back on consumption — for lack of money or access to credit owing to consecutive drought years — this can only be a temporary phenomenon. Sooner rather than later, they are bound to purchase more nutrients without which sustaining, leave alone improving, crop yields isn't possible. From a policy perspective, what matters is how to boost fertiliser usage efficiency by farmers that is both in their own interest and long-term soil health. The last one year has seen a crash in international prices of fertilisers. Much of it has to do with China turning from an importer to an exporter of urea and di-ammonium phosphate. China is, in fact, India's biggest supplier of these two key nutrients today. That, in combination with new capacities coming up in Saudi Arabia, Africa and North America, has made the global fertiliser market into one for buyers.

The government should seize this moment to decontrol fertilisers as it has already done in petro-products. Just as for LPG cylinders, let there be a fixed nutrient-based subsidy on every fertiliser, including urea, which is transferred directly to farmers' bank accounts after the purchase is made at market prices. Farmers will, then, buy the fertiliser that isn't the cheapest — subsidy should be only incidental to making such choices — but the best suited for their soils or crops. And let companies compete in offering such customised products.

THE HINDU BusinessLine

Boost for rabi crops

A good monsoon this year has also improved the prospects of rabi crops. Good progress of the monsoon in the later part of the season and late showers in many areas may help improve the moisture content of the soil that would help the rabi crops. Also, better rains after two years of below normal rains have improved the reservoir levels as well.

A recent CRISIL report states that the reservoir storages are higher by 17 per cent compared to last year which should support the production this season and the next season as well.

The future lies in organic farming

India holds a unique position among 172 countries practising organic agriculture: it has 6,50,000 organic producers, 699 processors, 669 exporters and 7,20,000 hectares under cultivation. But, with merely 0.4 per cent of total agricultural land under organic cultivation, the industry has a long journey ahead.

Last year, the Indian organic export and domestic market grew by 30 and 40 per cent respectively, and will sustain primarily due to an increasing number of affluent and health conscious consumers. As the industry continues to grow, it faces unique challenges. Due to relatively small volumes, the costs of organic food products are relatively high. The cost of cultivation increases as it takes more time and energy to produce than its chemical-intensive counterpart.

Supply-demand mismatch

High demand and low supply has further created an inflationary pressure on organic food products. This supply-demand mismatch can be eased fundamentally by making organic production mainstream with location-specific hybrid production strategies. Specialised farmer training costs, higher processing and inventory holding costs, and increased packaging, logistics and distribution costs add to the price of end products. Nevertheless, investments in achieving operations excellence by companies will facilitate lowering the cost of organic food products.

The absence of organic food products across all segments in the market is a concern. Consumers find little value buying limited organic products at a premium when rest of

the foodstuff they consume is non-organic. Prospects are immense on the supply side as currently organically cultivated crop areas represent only a small fraction of the total acreage of these crops. The good news is that the number of organic food categories has grown to more than 200, including tea, spices, flour, cereals, fruits, vegetables, milk, and honey. In order to sustain consumer trust, maintaining an accurate audit stream, and preventing cross-contamination with conventional goods would be crucial.

Many farmers are apprehensive about adopting organic farming due to the high production cost and the three-year transition period when farmers have to wait before getting their farms certified. This issue was addressed in the US by food manufacturers offering financial incentives to offset the waiting period. Ardent Mills pays farmers more remuneration for crops grown on land undergoing transition and helps them choose rotational crops they can sell to supplement their income. Kashi has created a logo, "Certified Transitional", to label products made from farms that are undergoing the process of transition.

There has been a contentious debate on the sustainability of organic farming. Though there is lower yield, these farms are more profitable and environmentally friendly, provide several ecosystem services, numerous social benefits and deliver nutritious foods with relatively less pesticide residues compared to conventional farming. Organically managed soils release less carbon dioxide per hectare per year than conventionally managed soils. New studies indicate that using the best management practices in organic systems over a long period of time can produce equal yields, or even outdo those of conventional systems.

More awareness required

There is low awareness at the producer level on the difference between conventional farming and organic farming. At the consumer level there is confusion between natural and organic products and limited understanding of the health benefits of organic food products. In addition, consumers are faced with a plethora of decisions around brands — imported or domestic, product quality, authenticity of claims and certifications. It is critical for companies involved in the organic food business to increase awareness among consumers in non-metro cities. Progressively, people across all income groups should have access to organic food. This can be facilitated by different means such as establishing community-supported agricultural farms or with "grow your own food" programmes. Where penetration is low, smaller sized packs can help encourage trials.

It has been estimated that in the US, the adverse impact of conventional farming on the environment and health costs $5 billion to $16.9 billion a year. These costs are actually paid by the consumer in the form of medical bills and decreased quality of life due to pollution. Impact assessment of organic farming compared to conventional farming

considering the sustainability framework can help to increase consumer awareness on the true cost of a product.

Many counterfeit organic products are available in the markets, which adversely impact the industry and consumer trust. Therefore, the Government has come up with stringent punishment for selling counterfeit organic produce. Organic farmers are unable to save their crops using traditional methods of pest control. The Government must rope in agricultural scientists and international research institutions to develop organic herbicides.

It will be a while before organic agricultural practices becomes mainstream. Many may argue that attempts made by the Government are inadequate and but positive results are showing up with time. Today, Sikkim is an organic state with 75,000 ha of land under organic cultivation based on an initiative that started in 2003. Meghalaya aims to convert 200,000 ha under organic farming by 2020.

Laudable approach

The courage shown by farmers to convert from conventional to organic is laudable. Kerala has more than 100,000 farmers practising organic farming and 10 cooperatives promoting the sector. The Centre's announcement for allocation of Rs. 1 billion for organic market development and Rs. 3 billion for the participatory guarantee scheme is commendable. Indian farmers are using inputs manufactured from energy-intensive processes and, in some cases, from imported sources resulting in a burden on the exchequer. They could follow organic practices and use available bio-wastes to transit towards a circular economy. Consumers should consume responsibly and stakeholders should prevent wastage along the supply chain. Meanwhile, organic agriculture in India will continue to grow and play a larger part in safely feeding 1.5 billion Indian mouths in 2030.

Organic agriculture is the best insurance policy that India can have for its population with better performance on productivity, environmental impact, economic viability and social well-being.

Focusing only on higher yields at the expense of other sustainability pillars (economics, environment and society) is not the food production system that India needs. What India needs is an integrated system that gives equal importance to all sustainability dimensions across the value chain and thus helps establish a healthy and well-fed society.

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