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India, Russia to set up agro irradiation centres

Subjecting food products to a low dosage of radiation helps mitigate post-harvest losses

: Expanding their cooperation in civil nuclear energy, India and Russia are collaborating to set up integrated irradiation centres in India to reduce agricultural losses.

A bilateral agreement for cooperation in the development of a network of integrated infrastructure irradiation centres was signed between the Indian Agricultural Association, Hindustan Agro Co-Op Ltd (HACL) and United Innovation Corporation (UIC), a subsidiary of ROSATOM State Atomic Energy Corporation of Russia, on the sidelines of the BRICS Business Forum in the national capital.

The agreement is to be implemented through a Joint Venture and aims to set up 25 integrated irradiation centres. It was signed by Bharat Dhokane Pandurang, Chairman of HACL, and Denis Cherednichenko, CEO of UIC.

In irradiation, food products are subjected to a low dosage of radiation to treat them for germs and insects, increasing their longevity and shelf life.

In India, according to estimates, post-harvest losses in food and food grains are around 40-50 per cent, primarily due to insect infestation, microbiological contamination, physiological changes due to sprouting and ripening, and poor shelf life.

“The wastage of fruits and vegetables alone is about Rs. 60,000 crore annually. Including cereals, meat, pulses and flowers, the annual loss is estimated to be Rs. 2,50,000 crores,” Mr. Pandurang added.

He said that there were a few low level irradiation plants in the country, which are not adequate.

“The use of irradiation will make it possible to reduce the loss of onions in India, which currently go bad because of germination and inadequate storage, by 42,000 tonnes per year on average, as well as to reduce grain losses from [the current] 15 per cent to 3-5 per cent per year,” Mr. Cherednichenko said after the signing.

In the first phase, seven centres will be set up in Maharashtra, which will begin with the upgradation of the current centre at Rahuri in Ahmednagar district.

They added that the irradiation doses are recommended by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and the final product is absolutely safe.

Rain boosts samba crop hopes of Delta farmers



Overnight rains, widespread and heavy, drenched several parts of the Delta region on Thursday, raising hopes among the farmers of saving their standing samba paddy crop. The increased discharge from the Mettur dam and prospects of more rains in the days to come have only added to their cheer.

The sky remained overcast since Wednesday morning in the Delta region, threatening to break into showers any time. Later on, it rained heavily in various parts of Thanjavur and Nagapattinam districts while some parts of Tiruvarur experienced mild showers on Wednesday and in the early hours of Thursday. Rain and thunder showers drenched Thanjavur town, Tirukkattupalli, Tiruvaiyaru, Papanasam, Kumbakonam, Vettikkadu, Orathanad and Grand Anicut areas of Thanjavur district and Mayiladuthurai, Sirkali and Tranquebar areas of Nagapattinam district.

In the meantime, samba paddy crop raised on close to nine lakh acres in the Delta districts of Thanjavur, Tiruvarur and Nagapattinam was found withering for want of water in many regions. While 2.60 lakh acres are under samba paddy in Thanjavur district, a total of 3.04 lakh acres are covered by the crop in the neighbouring Tiruvarur district even as Nagapattinam district accounted for 3.36 lakh acres.

“We were expecting Karnataka to comply with the Supreme Court orders and release water. When that did not happen, we thought that the rain Gods will save us. That too did not happen until now. There was not adequate water flowing down the Cauvery for us to

irrigate our fields. But Wednesday's rains have brought a ray of hope. We are hopeful that the rains might continue for some more days even as the regular north-east monsoon sets in," said Swamimalai S. Vimalnathan, secretary, Cauvery Farmers Protection Association.

In many areas, farmers have paid other ryots who have pumpsets to raise nurseries hoping that eventually rains would supplement the irrigational needs. But that is not to be.

Those crops are around 30 days' old now and are yet to be transplanted, Mr. Vimalnathan pointed out, adding only the timely onset of the north-east monsoon will make that possible.

These initial showers are especially helpful for the germination of seeds in the directly sown fields of Tiruvarur and Nagapattinam districts.

The ploughed fields had been looking barren all these days after the farmers went in for large-scale direct sowing which the State Government encouraged in a bid to reduce consumption of water, according to Agriculture Department officials.

Market intervention saves onion growers

The market intervention initiative of the Kadapa district administration three weeks ago to procure onions at Rs. 700 a quintal has come as a breather to the distressed onion growers of the district.

Onion crop was raised on 1,760 hectares in Kadapa district this year and in about 20,000 hectares in Kurnool district.

However, the price plummeted to as low as Rs. 4 to Rs. 5 a kg this year, as against Rs. 40 and Rs. 50 per kg. in the corresponding period the previous year, causing concern among onion growers, who incurred hefty losses.

Officials attributed the steep fall in onion prices to large-scale import of onions from Kurnool and Maharashtra and lack of demand in other districts.

The onion growers in Kadapa district were aghast at not being able to sell the onions at a break even price of Rs. 300 a quintal.

In this backdrop, Kadapa Joint Collector Swetha Teotia apprised Commissioner of Marketing Mallikarjuna Rao on the travails of the onion growers in Kadapa district, and sought market intervention by procuring onions at reasonable prices.

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.

Brahmavar to host two-day Krishi mela from tomorrow

A two-day krishi mela (agricultural fair) sponsored by the government will begin at Brahmavar in Udipi district from October 15.

It will have seminars, interaction, exhibition and demonstration of farm machineries.

There would be a seminar on “cultivation of plantation crops” on the first day.

It would be followed by seminars on “use of modern farm implements in agriculture” and “profitable integrated farming systems” on the second day. Scientists from the University of Agricultural and Horticultural Sciences (UAHS), Shivamogga, progressive farmers and scientists from other government agencies will speak on the themes.

There would be interactive sessions, according to a release from the Zonal Agricultural and Horticultural Research Station, Brahmavar. According to the release, about 100 stakeholders are expected to put up their stalls to showcase farm technologies and machineries.

The objective of the mela is to expose farmers to the latest trends in agriculture.

The mela would showcase high yielding rice varieties and value added farm products. There will be a sale of decorative plants.

Also, a demonstration on cashew grafting and soil and water management in cashew gardens, organic manure compost and vermi compost, nutrient management in coconut and arecanut gardens will be part of the mela.

Minister for Youth Empowerment and Sports Pramod Madhwaraj will inaugurate the event.

V. Vasudevappa, Vice-Chancellor, UAHS, Shivamogga, will preside over the inaugural session.

On the occasion, integrated farming systems within the Brahmavar station will be inaugurated. The website of the station will also be launched.

Implementation of central agri-schemes in Uttar Pradesh very slow: Radha Mohan Singh



Stating that pace of implementation of central agri-schemes in Uttar Pradesh is “very slow”, Union Agriculture Minister Radha Mohan Singh on Friday asked the state to execute these programmes expeditiously for farmers’ welfare. In a telephonic interaction with UP farmers, Singh said the Centre is working expeditiously to implement agri related schemes across the country. “However, the pace of implementation related to most of central agriculture related schemes in Uttar Pradesh is very slow,” Singh said in an official statement.

Citing the example of Soil Health Card Scheme, the minister said there is a target of 263.91 lakh card distribution in UP during 2015-17. “However, only 34.78 lakh cards have been given away by now which is 87 per cent below the target,” he said. Singh was speaking to farmers from Agra, Aligarh, Mathura and Bulandshahr districts.

He expressed hope that UP government would focus on implementation of agriculture related schemes for the welfare of the farmers. The farmers asked queries pertaining to Pradhan Mantri Gramin Sadak Yojna, Pradhan Mantri Krishi Sinchayee Yojana, Pradhan Mantri Fasal Bima Yojana, Pradhan Mantri Krihsi Vikas Yojna, Pramparagat Krishi Vikas Yojna, Soil Health Scheme, neem coated urea and National Agriculture Market schemes.

Kerala govt to expand organic vegetable cultivation

With the objective of attaining self-sufficiency in terms of vegetables, Kerala government is planning to bring in additional 50,000 hectares of land under organic vegetable cultivation. Addressing a press meet here, state Agriculture Minister V S Sunil Kumar said the LDF government's plan is to expand farming by bringing in people of all sectors. "The government's effort is to bring in additional 50,000 hectares of land under organic vegetable cultivation. Our aim is to attain self-sufficiency in terms of vegetables in the next three years," he said.

As part of the plan, the number of eco-shops selling organic farm products under the agriculture department would be increased, he said.

Retail inflation hits 13-month low as vegetable prices ease



Continuing to decline for the second consecutive month, retail inflation fell to a 13-month low of 4.31 per cent in September, primarily aided by lower food prices especially those of vegetables. Food prices inflation for September stood at 3.88 per cent, the same level as last year but sharply lower than 5.91 per cent recorded last month

This is the first time in this financial year that the overall Consumer Price Index (CPI)-based inflation has fallen below the Reserve Bank of India's inflation target of 5 per cent by March 2017. The previous low of 3.74 per cent was recorded in August last year.

The CPI-based inflation rate for August 2016 was 5.05 per cent and September 2015 was 4.41 per cent.

Big farm opportunities seen for business in 2030 UN goals

Businesses could earn hundreds of billions of dollars a year by 2030 by investing in better agriculture and food ranging from micro-irrigation of crops to reduced waste, an international study said on Friday.

A commission including chief executives of Unilever and Aviva as well as academics and civil society groups said companies could exploit U.N. plans to end poverty and hunger and protect the planet by 2030.

“Instead of treating it as ‘Oh my God, another huge global problem to worry about’ ... you can break it down into chunks of real business possibility,” Mark Malloch-Brown, chair of the Business and Sustainable Development Commission, told Reuters.

THE HINDU **BusinessLine**

Why the Central government should go all out to expand oil palm cultivation

It will increase domestic supplies, lower the edible oil import bill and save foreign exchange



The Indian edible oil sector is the world’s fourth-largest after the US, China and Brazil and accounts for around 9 per cent of the world’s oilseed production.

An irony of this industry is its heavy dependence on imports. Cooking oil imports are all set to touch a record 15 million tonnes (mt) in the current, 2015-16 Oil Year, ending October. Out of the 15 mt, palm oil imports alone account for 9 mt or 60 per cent.

The reason for palm oil occupying the lion’s share of the total consumption is because palm is generally the cheapest commodity vegetable oil and also the cheapest oil to produce and refine globally.

Therefore, focussed palm oil cultivation will undoubtedly play a key role in addressing the domestic shortfall in edible oil consumption and lowering India's edible oil import bill and saving foreign exchange.

Highest-yielding crop

A distinct advantage that palm enjoys is that it is the highest-yielding perennial edible oil crop and needs a fraction of the area used to grow in comparison to other oilseeds. This is indeed potentially attractive in a country like India, where land is increasingly scarce as the population rockets.

On a per-hectare basis, oil palm trees are 6-10 times more efficient at producing oil than temperate oilseed crops such as rapeseed, soyabean, sunflower or ground nut. For example, while a hectare of land can yield 300-400 kg of groundnut oil, nearly 4 tonnes of palm oil can be produced from a hectare of land.

The case for palm oil

P Rethinam, a plantation crop management specialist, in his detailed report titled 'Increasing Vegetable Oil Production through Oil Palm Cultivation in India' observes: "27 million hectares of nine oilseed crops produce about 9 million tonnes of oil per year but 2 million hectares of oil palm could produce 8 million tonnes of crude palm oil, 0.8 million tonnes of palm kernel oil, palm kernel cake, bio mass for bio energy, eco-friendly bio-diesel, etc." There is a big potential to raise the acreage of palm, which is currently cultivated on about 200,000 hectares. According to OPDPA, India has the potential to expand the acreage to 20 lakh hectares, keeping in view the demand. If this is done, the palm oil industry, which provides employment to 20,000 people, can create two lakh additional jobs.

Indian palm oil production is estimated at 1.7 lakh tonnes for 2014-15, up from 0.6 lakh tonnes in 2010-11. Palm oil cultivation has grown from zero to 2,00,000 hectares in the past two decades.

The Central government has been trying, for many years now, to reduce its dependence on imported edible oils by encouraging farmers to take up palm cultivation. In an encouraging move, the current government has announced a package of Rs. 10,000 crore over three years, which is intended to support farmers until the trees begin to yield (it takes three to five years for the palm tree to start yielding fruit).

The government has identified nine States with suitable climatic conditions. In November 2015, the government has also allowed 100 per cent FDI in palm oil plantations, a move the industry believes will boost domestic production, bring in more funds and newer technologies into the sector.

Industry challenges

However, there are several road blocks for India preventing it from successfully expanding on its domestic palm oil cultivation. First and foremost, lack of large land tracts is a major constraint.

The industry wants the government to declare palm oil as a plantation crop to move it out of the Land Ceiling Act. Moreover, the current import duty is not supportive of oil palm farmers and the industry.

Secondly, the Indian edible oil industry has been urging the government to maintain a duty differential of at least 15 per cent on crude and refined oil to protect the interests of refineries. Domestic edible oil refiners are facing a surge of imports of refined oil over the last few months, reducing their capacity utilisation to 30-40 per cent from 55-60 per cent a year ago.

Last month, the Centre lowered the import duty on crude palm oil from 12.5 per cent to 7.5 per cent and on refined oil from 20 per cent to 15 per cent. Hence, there was no change at all in the duty differential and the move is not expected to have any impact on either the industry or farmers.

The government needs to provide a level playing field to the domestic refining industry. Otherwise, Indian edible oil importers will be perpetually fighting a losing battle with cheap rival palm oil from top producers Malaysia and Indonesia.

Conclusion

A focus on palm oil cultivation is key to India's goal of attaining self-sufficiency in vegetable oils over the next decade. The palm oil industry deserves the highest priority and encouragement from the government to meet the internal demand of edible oil, resulting in a strong imprint on savings of foreign exchange, employment generation and boosting India's food security.

The writer is Founder & Managing Director, Ruchi Soya Industries Limited. Views are personal