

29.09.2016

THE HINDU

Mahindra Agri buys 33% in start-up MeraKisan



Making its foray into the e-commerce space, Mahindra Agri Solutions, the agriculture business of the Mahindra Group, through one of its joint venture companies, has acquired 33 per cent stake in Pune-based agriculture e-commerce start-up MeraKisan Pvt Ltd for an unspecified amount.

Direct sourcing

The minority stake has been acquired by Mahindra Univeg Pvt Ltd, a 60:40 joint venture between Mahindra Agri Solutions and Belgium based Univeg (formerly Greenyard Foods). MeraKisan operates its business through its website shopping.merakisan.com. The start-up supplies fresh fruits and vegetables to end-users by directly sourcing from farmers.

Through this business model MeraKisan provides a cost-benefit of about 10 per cent to consumers while the farmers get prices that are 15 to 20 per cent higher for their produce, it is learnt.

While the company takes the orders, the farmers directly deliver the produce to end-users.

It caters to Pune and Navi Mumbai markets.

“State has potential to develop brackish water aquaculture”



Thanks to the availability of 56,000 hectares of brackish water lands, Tamil Nadu has great potential to develop brackish water aquaculture, M. Jayanthi, Principal Scientist, Indian Council of Agriculture Research (ICAR) – Central Institute of Brackish water Aquaculture (CIBA) said.

Addressing a training workshop for the benefit of farmers engaged in shrimp aquaculture, organised by the National Innovations in Climatic Resilient Agriculture (NICRA) and CIBA here on Wednesday, she said the State could considerably increase production of shrimps, sea bass (fish) and mud crab if the lands were brought under aquaculture.

She said only 10 per cent of the brackish water lands, which could not be used for any other purpose other than aquaculture, was presently used for aquaculture. CIBA, the research institute was willing to provide alternative species and sustainable technologies and the Fisheries department and Marine Product Export Development Authority (MPEDA) could help to expand brackish water aquaculture, she said.

Besides sea bass and mud crab, farmers could grow ‘indicus,’ the native shrimp species, she said. Presently, farmers were cultivating ‘L.vannamei’, the species exported to foreign countries. Dismissing as ‘disinformation campaign’ that shrimp farms polluted waterbodies and environment, Ms. Jayanthi said shrimp was a ‘delicate animal’ and could survive only in clean brackish water.

“No chemical or anti-biotic is used in the farm ponds and there is no question of effluents let out from the ponds causing pollution to the environment,” she said. Analysis of soil, water and animal samples taken from 50 ponds in the district revealed that the soil and water conditions were good for shrimp culture, she said.

The samples were analysed under the guidance of K. K. Vijayan, Director of CIBA, she said.

However, the farmers were advised to adopt CIBA's management measures for sustained development, she added.

There were 160 licensed shrimp farm ponds in the district and the farmers harvested about 4 tonnes per hectare in 120 to 150 days.

CIBA scientists sensitised the farmers to climate change impacts and adaptations measures and the training workshop was addressed and attended by scientists, research scholars, technical officers and farmers.

Scientists who addressed the workshop included M Muralidhar, M Kumaran, R Saraswathi, K P Kumaraguruvasagam, N Lalitha, Satheesha Avunje and M Makesh. M Kasinathapandian, Deputy Director of Fisheries addressed the inaugural session.

Farmers happy with decision to switch to red gram from cotton



Lakhs of farmers in Raichur district who had suffered heavy losses last year following the pink bollworm pest attack in their Bt cotton fields just before harvest are now feeling happy as their decision to switch from cotton to red gram this year has turned out to be a good one.

Red gram, sown on time thanks to the early onset of monsoon and with nutrients applied and pesticides sprayed when required, is now standing opulently on vast tracts of fields across the rural area.

As the fear of recurrence of pink bollworm pest menace had driven farmers to give up cotton and take up red gram cultivation. The area under red gram cultivation has expanded from 40,000 hectares in the last kharif season to 96,000 hectares in the current

season. Similarly, the area under cotton cultivation has shrunk from 60,000 hectares to 43,000 hectares in the same period.

The farmers were indeed very upset when their healthy red gram crop began to sear due to heat stress caused by monsoon shortage in August and the first half of September. Their faces, however, bloomed, just as their crop did, in the second half of this month when their fields received satisfactory rainfall that was almost uniformly distributed across the district.

“My red-gram crop is beautifully grown, just as in the fields of others. I am expecting an yield of at least seven quintals an acre. Hope, I recover the loss that I incurred last year in cotton,” said a farmer from Ashapur village.

Apprehensions

Many farmers have, however, expressed apprehensions about uncertain prices of red gram crop this year due to expansion of the cultivation area. The crop that had seen a high price of Rs. 10,000 a quintal last year, is now being sold at Rs. 4,990 to Rs. 6,500 a quintal.

“With the arrival of freshly harvested crop in December, the prices are likely to drop further. We may have to open red gram procurement centres to buy the crop at Minimum Support Price (MSP) in the event of a price cash,” M. Kiran Kumar, Joint Director of Agriculture, said.

Speaking to *The Hindu*, Padmayya Naik, Managing Director of Karnataka Red Gram Development Board, said that he would shortly write to the government in the matter.

“We are going to discuss the matter in the meeting of Board of Directors and subsequently write to the government,” he said.

Curbs on open sale of pesticides in Kottayam

Authorities have clamped curbs on open sale of controlled pesticides in the district. According to district authorities, this is as part of the campaign launched by the Department of Agriculture Development and Farmers' Welfare in the State.

Under the new directive, pesticides, including Cabrosulfan, Chlorpyrifos, Cypermethri, Lambada-Cyhalothrin, Acephate, Glyphosate, and 2,4-Dichlorophenoxyacetic acid (2,4-D) can be sold only against a prescription by an agriculture expert of the rank of Agriculture Officer.

According to a press note by Deputy Director, Agriculture, the Department has intensified inspection of stores selling chemical insecticides. It has come to the notice of

the authorities that some of the suppliers were directly bringing insecticides to the farms without any authorisation.

Scientific methods

It was the endeavour of the department to encourage farmers to adopt scientific methods and bring down the use of chemical pesticides, the press note said.

MS Swaminathan appreciates CM

Eminent agriculture scientist M.S. Swaminathan appreciated the efforts of Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister N. Chandrababu Naidu towards building capital Amaravati, according to the representatives of HYM International Certifications Pvt. Ltd.

HYMIC Chairman Chandu Sambasiva Rao, CEO T. Ramakrishna and M.D. A. Sivaiah met Mr. Swaminathan at his institute Dr. M.S. Swaminathan Research Foundation in Chennai on Wednesday.

Mr. Sambasiva Rao said they had invited Mr. Swaminathan to attend the HYM Excellence in Quality Awards- 2016 to be held soon.

Speaking on the occasion, Mr. Swaminathan appreciated the efforts of Mr. Naidu and also asked HYMIC team to bring up contest for those taking in the construction of Amaravati.

Near-full reservoirs make water managers happy



With the recent downpour resulting in good inflows almost filling up reservoirs that supply water to the city and levels in Yeleru reservoir, the mainstay, better than last year, officials hope to tide over the summer situation next year.

Two major factors brightened the scenario that had gone through a critical phase all through the summer beginning right from January 2016. The Yeleru reservoir at 77 meters level now is 3.5 meters more than last year's maximum level.

The Meghdrigedda reservoir (MGR) that serves as a buffer for GVMC supplies now stands at 57.3 feet, close to the full level of 59.5 feet. In case of any problem it can be always be relied upon to meet any contingency, say sources.

With Yeleru levels improving, some maintenance work is required to draw water from the canal. Therefore, no water will be drawn from it until such work is done. With rain water flowing through the canal, no water has ben drawn from Yeleru reservoir or Kateru pumping scheme for more than a week now, it is learnt. In spite of the better situation, the Yeleru supply comes with a rider: it may vary depending upon agricultural commitment to the second crop to the ayacut in East Godavari district.

Facing a grim situation, the GVMC had resorted to pumping of water from the dead storage of Yeleru reservoir from January 26 and continued it till the end of August barring for a week towards the end. Flow by gravity resumed from September. The current spell of rain has improved the situation considerably though it is still below the full level of 86.56 m. With inflows still continuing and more rainfall activity in the Northeast Monsoon, the situation may improve further. With Raiwada at 113.4 meters against FRL of 114 meters, Tatipudi at 292 against FRL of 297 and Mudasarlova reservoir close to the city at 167 feet against the FRL of 169 feet the rain proved quite beneficial as far as the water supply situation is concerned.

GVMC supplies around 60 MGD daily for domestic consumption.

JK Paper plans to increase plantation in Myanmar



Mumbai, September 23:

JK Paper is exploring the possibility of enhancing forest plantation in Myanmar to secure its key raw material for operations in India.

The paper industry, which has made an investment of Rs. 20,000 crore in the past five years, is hit hard by high pulp prices. Globally, pulp prices have plunged, helping companies in China, Indonesia and Korea to export paper to India at low prices. Though the domestic industry is protected with an import duty of 10 per cent, most of these countries tap into the Indian market duty-free or by paying marginal duty as they have signed a free trade agreement or bilateral treaty.

Harsh Pati Singhania, Managing Director, JK Paper, said the company is looking to secure pulp requirement by enhancing plantation in Myanmar, as the wait for a dedicated policy on industrial plantation in India is getting longer.

“We already have forest plantation in Myanmar and we want to increase the coverage rapidly over a period of time. The import of pulp, paper and allied products at \$4 billion is expected to increase to \$18 billion by 2026 and in the absence of raw material security it would become difficult to add new capacity,” he said.

The industry requires 10 million tonne of wood annually and the supply is pegged at 9 mt. Though the paper industry does farm forestry on 90,000 ha annually, the raw material shortage pegged at 1 mt may widen with the growing demand.

The area under JK Paper's contract plantation went up 3.5 per cent to 17,700 ha last fiscal, with the distribution of 8.13 crore saplings. This has made the company plant more trees than it cuts for captive use.

Of the 29 million hectares of degraded forest land, Singhanian said the paper industry has urged the government to allow plantation on 2.5 million hectares for industrial use.

Wood pulp prices in India are about \$150 a tonne while in Brazil and Indonesia it is about \$50 and \$80 a tonne, respectively. This apart, the distance between the pulp plant and wood sourcing location is about 150-2000 km against the global average of 50-200 km. Given the high logistics cost in India, the paper industry is not able to compete with low cost imports seeping into the country.

Globally, India is the fastest growing market for paper. It registered a growth of 7 per cent last fiscal and the demand is expected to touch 27 mt by 2030 from the current level of 27 mt. The industry has to invest Rs. 90,000 crore over 15 years to meet the growing demand. In the past five years, the paper industry has made an investment of Rs. 20,000 crore to put up additional capacity.

No space for small farmers in politics, rues Punjab's award-winning innovator



Jinder Singh, winner of Pandit Deendayal Upadhyaya Krishi Puraskar for diversification, alleges lack of political will to bring Punjab's peasantry out of misery. (Anil Dayal/HT Photo)

Doing well with just three acres, Jinder Singh can inspire the small farmers of Punjab to diversify. But he finds no policy for their survival.

“I do fine but how can small farmers sustain, grow, and get out of misery without a state policy?” the diversification hero who received Pandit Deendayal Upadhyaya Krishi Puraskar from the Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR) said. “Those diversifying (from the wheat-paddy cycle) do so at their own peril. With limited resources, it's a risk.”

The Rupnagar innovator credits his success to “my own hard work”. Eight years ago, all he had was a week's training from the local Krishi Vigyan Kendra (KVK) of the agriculture department. “Any ordinary farmer will hesitate to diversify, and rightly so,” he said. “He lives hand to mouth and under debt. A single crop loss while experimenting can be disaster for him, since there is no backup.”

FARM ECONOMICS

Jinder has devoted a couple of his 3 acres to horticulture and the rest to paddy this kharif (monsoon crop) season. Growing capsicum, chilli, tomato, onion, and spinach fetches him Rs 1.25 lakh profit from each acre. So From 2-acre horticulture field, he gains Rs 2.5 lakh in the season. Yes, after excluding all the input cost.

Capsicum and cucumber from his 4-kanal-plus greenhouse fetch him a third more than the market price for these vegetables. In 2007, he tried greenhouse nets after picking up the technique at the KVK camp. Thereafter, he explored farm technology, became active member of Punjab Agricultural University's farmers' club, and took training at Pune in 2011.

SIMPLE LIFESTYLE

Jinder, a baptised Sikh, blames Punjab farmers' "casual lifestyle" for their misery. "Materialism, alcoholism, and drug abuse took them down."

"Besides providing farmers with logistic support, the government also must deal with drug addiction and exploitation of the poor," he said. "The Punjabi life used to be so simple. Now we have put a price tag on everything, whether marriage, education or healthcare. Our greed and desire to ape the rich are the sources of our problems."

'SEARCHING FOR POLITICAL SPACE'

"Punjab's political leadership is from the big-landlord class, so there's no space for marginal farmers in panchayats," Jinder Singh said. "How do we have a system for small farmers in place when they are not the stakeholders in power?"

He regretted that kisan leaders such as Ajmer Singh Lakhawal and Balbir Singh Rajewal had "leaned gradually towards the government", and agricultural trade unions had split into factions.

State to get ₹1,269 cr in drought assistance

Four months after Maharashtra government sought financial assistance of Rs4,269 crore to mitigate drought, the Centre approved aid worth Rs1,269 crore on Wednesday. This is the second relief package granted by the Centre in the past 10 months to tackle drought and acute water shortage prevalent in many parts of Maharashtra until August.

However, the grant is far less than what was sought by the state in May. A high-powered committee headed by home minister Rajnath Singh took this decision in Delhi at a meeting on Wednesday. Confirming this, an official from the chief minister's office (CMO) said the aid was approved following the recommendations of a central government committee that had inspected drought-affected villages earlier this year.

In December 2015, the central government had approved monetary relief worth Rs3,049 crore to deal with drought. However, when the number of drought-affected villages hit 29,610 — 70% of the 40,559 villages in the state — chief minister Devendra Fadnavis sought financial assistance from the Centre after deliberations with Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

The state had sought assistance worth Rs8,271 crore and has got half this amount — around Rs4,318 crore — so far.

“Our demand was not in accordance to the National Disaster Response Force (NDRF) rules — under which the central government provides monetary assistance to states — as we already had received aid once. This led to a delay in the Centre clearing the proposal,” said a senior official from the relief and rehabilitation department.

The state provides compensation for damaged crops, exemption from payment of land-related revenue, school and college examination fees, a discount of 33.5% on power bills of agriculture pump, restructuring of crop loans and stay on debt recovery as relief to the affected farmers.

Paddy procurement in Ludhiana district may get delayed due to rain



A worker sifting grain at the Gill Road Grain Market in Ludhiana on Monday. Chandigarh meteorological department has predicted a rainy Tuesday. (HT Photo)

Rogue weather, observed over the past few days, is likely to delay paddy procurement in the district’s mandis that was scheduled to begin on October 1.

Monday witnessed heavy rainfall accompanied by high velocity winds for an hour between 11.30am and 12.30pm. Adding to woes, Chandigarh’s meteorological department has predicted a similar forecast for Tuesday.

“Procurement will definitely get delayed by three to four days considering harvesting will not be possible on rainy days. If the weather fails to change, procurement will further get

delayed,” said district mandi officer Jaswinder Singh, adding that as of now he and his team were busy in the final preparations for this procurement season.

Meanwhile, mandis will give farmers Rs 1,510 and Rs 1,470 per quintal for grade ‘A’ or ‘B’ produce. These grades will be given as per quality.

‘Rain will cause marketing issues’

SS Gosal, former research director at Punjab Agricultural University (PAU), pointed out that farmers will suffer because rainy days will result in marketing issues during the procurement season.

“Rain and wind at this stage is a threat because it will increase the moisture content in the crop and the grains. Mechanised harvesting will be a difficult task wherever the crops have flattened. Considering all factors, they will also decline yield and quality of the produce,” said Gosal.

A noted agricultural economist, Mohinder Singh Sidhu said the area under paddy in the Ludhiana district was around 2.6 lakh hectares while the total area in Punjab 30 lakh hectares.

“The produce will come from 2.6 lakh hectares of agricultural land and so far, the production does not seem affected. However, if rainy days continue, there are chances of decline in productivity,” said Sidhu, adding that the district generally produces 11.2 lakh tons of paddy which could go up if the weather remains favourable.

Wish list of farmers

The enthusiasm of farmers, who were hoping to make huge profits this season, has taken a hit due to the current weather conditions.

“When moisture content rises in the grains and their colour becomes brown due to excess rain, the produce is priced at lower rates. So, we wish that the rain stops so that we finally begin harvesting the crop and reach mandis with quality produce,” said Kuljeet Singh, a farmer from Mullanpur.

The district’s farmers pointed out that they wanted the Punjab Mandi Board to make all arrangements if it continued to rain during the procurement.

“Each year, there are times when the produce gets wet due to shortage of tarpaulins or paucity of storage space. However, we want that there should be no loopholes,” said a group of farmers.