

VC for new strategies to manage nemotodes



Vice- Chancellor of Tamil Nadu Agricultural University P.Murugesha Boopathi (second left) releasing a book on Nematology in Coimbatore on Tuesday.

COIMBATORE: Nematodes are the most devastating pests causing huge crop losses. With certain effective pesticides being withdrawn from the world market due to their harmful effects, alternative strategies to control nematodes need to be developed, P. Murugesha Boopathi, Vice-Chancellor, Tamil Nadu Agricultural University (TNAU), said here on Tuesday.

He was inaugurating a three-day national conference on “Innovations in Nematological Research for Agricultural Sustainability – Challenges and Road Map Ahead” at the university. The conference was being held in collaboration with Nematological Society of India.

Pointing out that the estimated annual yield loss worldwide was to the extent of \$ 100 billion, the Vice-Chancellor said the annual yield loss in India due to nematodes was Rs. 210 crore.

“Nematology scientists should conduct detailed research on life history and behaviour of nematodes and other related areas to develop new strategies for nematode management,” the Vice-Chancellor urged.

Releasing two books on nematology, Mr. Boopathy said TNAU had the pride of establishing the first nematology laboratory in the country in 1961. It also had the largest number of nematology scientists (23) among the institutions.

Sudershan Ganguly, General Secretary, Nematological Society of India, said in spite of their harmful effects, nematodes had proved to be quite useful. "Free-living soil nematodes not only regulate the microbial population, but also contribute to soil health by nutrient mineralisation." R.K. Jain, Vice-President of the society, also spoke.

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Below the radar, a new agribusiness pact with the U.S.

The MoU is also intended to give a push to private investment in agriculture

NEW DELHI: The government last week quietly secured Cabinet approval for a new agreement with the United States that aims, inter alia, at promoting the privatisation of agricultural extension services and facilitating collaborations between American agribusiness and the Indian farm sector.

The proposed Memorandum of Understanding with the U.S. on 'Agriculture Cooperation and Food Security' was approved on Thursday and is likely to be signed this or early next month.

The MoU, a copy of which was accessed by *The Hindu*, is also intended to give a push to private investment in agriculture for growth of agribusinesses and farm-market linkages with stress on creating an enabling environment for private investment and reciprocal trade. It includes bilateral policy dialogue and agri business-to-business collaboration between India and the U.S.

Nutrition security

The nutrition security component calls for bilateral cooperation and best practices, including access to adequate quantities and quality of "diverse diet and diversified and fortified foods" and an integrated programme that targets the most vulnerable. The food security aspect focuses on sharing technological expertise and promotion of private sector extension in agriculture. Collaboration in S and T and education would focus on technology to farmers and agribusinesses.

The weather forecasting for crop management and market information part of the pact highlights improvement of crop production management in response to vagaries of weather and potential impact of climate change variability.

According to geneticist Suman Sahai of Gene Campaign, while India could gain from improved weather forecast technology in the proposed MoU, the bilateral collaboration on S&T, food and nutrition security will give access to the U.S. to India's great genetic diversity of crop plants for commercialisation in its interest. "The opening of food security

policy dialogue is also a matter of concern as it will impose on India the U.S. model of agribusinesses and vertical integration of food chain, impacting diversity and consolidating monopolies," she said.

The costs of implementing the MoU would be borne by "parties that incur them." Joint Working Groups would be set up to implement each component. Intellectual property issues would be settled as per the S&T agreement with the U.S., which was also approved in the last Cabinet meeting. Curiously, both agreements have been kept under wraps.

The stated justification for the MoU is that it would enable India to work with the U.S. as a partner to bolster "India's agriculture and contribute to sustained growth and commercial viability of the farm sector."

An India-U.S. Agriculture Knowledge Initiative is already in place that allows for U.S.-based private multi-national trading and seed giants like Cargill and Monsanto to be appointed on the board, enabling them to bear influence on the country's farm research.

The present MoU was initiated under the India-U.S. Agriculture Dialogue during Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's visit to Washington last November.

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Mettur level

The water level in Mettur dam stood at 75.16 feet on Tuesday against its full level of 120 feet. The inflow was 868 cusecs and the discharge, 1,800 cusecs.

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Water level

Madurai: Water level in the Periyar dam on Tuesday stood at 110.60 feet (full level 136 feet) with an inflow of 116 cusecs and a discharge of 300 cusecs. The level in the Vaigai dam was 37.93 feet (71 feet) with no inflow and a discharge of 60 cusecs.

The combined Periyar credit stood at 698 mcft.

Protect trees, grow more

Campaign on climate change in Udthagamandalam

Udhagamandalam: Tree planting programmes should no longer be a mere ritualistic exercise, said the District Forest officer, the Nilgiris North, K. Soundarapandian, while inaugurating a campaign on Climate Change organised by the Nilgiris Environment and Cultural Service Trust (NEST) at the Oxford Teacher Training Institute here on Tuesday.

The people and organisations taking saplings from the forest department should ensure that they are nurtured. Problems associated with climate change and carbon emission can be combated only by protecting the existing trees and growing more trees, he said. It should be ensured that the density of forests is not reduced.

Eucalyptus and other species are not being encouraged, he said adding the policy of the department is to promote native species only as the shola trees function like a sponge and release water throughout the year. Fire is a major source of concern to the department.

Mr. Soundarapandian said that teachers should influence the children.

The chairman, Udthagamandalam Municipal Council, R. Rajendran, who presided over the programme said that the government cannot implement schemes successfully without the cooperation of the people.

Sad turn

Referring to the planting scheme initiated by him a couple of years ago, he said that though 1,000 Jacaranda saplings had been planted in various parts of the town only about 300 have established firm roots. Emphasising the need to act more and talk less, he said that people should avoid using vehicles unnecessarily.

The Assistant Conservator of Forests Jayaraj said that the stress now is on people's participation in the programmes of the forest department.

The people should be familiarised with the direct and indirect benefits of trees.

The Field Officer, CPR Environmental Education Centre, M. Kumaravelu, said that awareness must lead to action. The Managing Trustee, NEST, V. Sivadass, said that the economic well being of the Nilgiris is dependent on its weather.

The release of a pamphlet on climate change by Mr. Soundarapandian marked the occasion.

PM steps in, to meet warring leaders today over Bt brinjal

TNN, Feb 24, 2010, 03.46am IST

NEW DELHI: Prime Minister Manmohan Singh is to consult on Wednesday senior ministers who have differed with each other over the decision to impose a two-year moratorium on Bt brinjal to sort out issues relating to evaluation and research related to the development of GM foods in India.

While agriculture minister Sharad Pawar has openly disagreed with environment minister Jairam Ramesh's decision to keep farm use of Bt brinjal on hold, the Congress seems to be backing Ramesh, going with the view that it would be sagacious to adopt a cautious approach on GM foods. Congress spokespersons have repeatedly supported Ramesh.

MoS in PMO Prithviraj Chavan has said Bt brinjal is safe but has not directly opposed the moratorium saying that he was not opposed to more tests. But he has argued that scientists have been thorough in their tests, a view supported by Council for Scientific and Industrial Research chief Samir Brahmachari. HRD minister Kapil Sibal, who held the science and technology charge before Chavan, has said the issue should be settled by scientists.

With Pawar writing to the PM reportedly seeking clarifications about which authority will clear GM foods as the Genetic Engineering Approval Committee had cleared Bt brinjal, a meeting has been convened to get rid of the haze generated by the controversy. The aim, said well-placed sources, was to iron out differences and ensure greater synergy rather than undo the moratorium announced by Ramesh.

The government is in any case planning a National Biotechnology Regulatory authority that will oversee such clearances in the future. The debate over the authority has, however, just begun with some opponents of GM foods attacking it for being a proposal moved by the department of bio-technology which they believe has a vested interest in promoting transgenic crops.

The public hearings route that Ramesh adopted before announcing a moratorium was seen as unsatisfactory by some scientific quarters who felt that their voices got drowned out. But seen in a political light, the moratorium, given sharply opposed opinions and interests as well as the developing nature of GM research, is seen to have been a desirable course of action. To this extent, the PM's intervention is not seen as a setback to Ramesh.

Activists have been quick to attack Pawar for seeking to reverse the moratorium but the government does not seem prepared to take any fundamentalist position on GM foods. The government, said sources, would like to develop and strengthen indigenous capacities on transgenic crops. Bt cotton has been seen as a success and the prospect of GM crops offering a new line of defence against pestilence and drought cannot be overlooked in a country the size of India.



Ramesh said Bt will destroy brinjal's ayurvedic value, experts beg to differ



New Delhi : One of the claims Environment Minister Jairam Ramesh made to justify his freeze on Bt brinjal was that the Bt gene would “destroy the medicinal properties of brinjal” which is used in several “traditional” forms of medicine.

This claim, too, is being contested by experts as Ramesh comes under increasing pressure from within his government — the Prime Minister has called a meeting after Agriculture Minister Sharad Pawar warned against “ad hoc” decisions on GM food that could set the “clock back” and demoralise Indian scientists.

“I have also been informed that Indian systems of medicine, including ayurveda, siddha, homeopathy and unani, use brinjal as a medicinal ingredient both in raw and cooked form for treatment of respiratory diseases and that the entire brinjal plant is used in such preparations,” said Ramesh in his written statement while announcing the freeze.

“There is fear that Bt brinjal will destroy these medicinal properties due to loss of synergy, differences in the alkaloids and changes in other active principles.”

Significantly, the government’s Department of Ayurveda, Yoga and Naturopathy, Unani, Siddha and Homeopathy (AYUSH), which falls under the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, was not consulted on the issue, a senior official has confirmed to The Indian Express.

When contacted today, Ramesh said: “There are different points of view, that’s why we need more clarity.”

Experts counter his reasoning.

For one, C Nayak, Director General of Central Council for Research in Homeopathy, told The Indian Express that no variety of brinjal is used in homeopathic medicine.

Even in ayurveda or unani, experts say, not more than five “wild varieties” — of the almost 300 types — of brinjal are used. “The brinjal that we eat does not have any medicinal value,” said Darshan Shankar, who launched the Foundation for Revitalisation of Local Health Traditions in Bangalore and advises the Planning Commission on the Indian system of medicine.

“Certain wild varieties, which have a slightly different biochemical composition, do have medicinal properties and these are frequently used in the Indian system of medicine — formal like ayurveda or unani as well as oral or folk forms. The effect of Bt gene on these varieties isn’t clear and we don’t even know whether the gene is proposed to be introduced in these wild varieties too,” said Shankar.

“If the gene is supposed to be introduced only in varieties that are normally eaten by people, we need to ascertain whether this gene would migrate to wild varieties. I don’t think there have been enough experiments to conclude that the medicinal properties would be destroyed,” he said.

A scientist who is a member of the Genetic Engineering Approval Committee (GEAC) which cleared Bt brinjal, said — on the condition that he not be named — that the only change the Bt gene brings in brinjal is in its ability to fight the fruit and shoot borer that destroys the brinjal plant. “Every other quality of Bt brinjal remains the same as that of non-Bt brinjal,” he said.

G S Lavekar, Director General of Central Council for Research on Ayurveda and Siddha, said brinjal was used for treatment of bronchitis and insomnia. Calling for more tests, he admitted that there was no evidence so far that the Bt gene interfered with brinjal’s medicinal properties.