



BASAI News Updates

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Govt may sell cereals in open mkt to rein in prices

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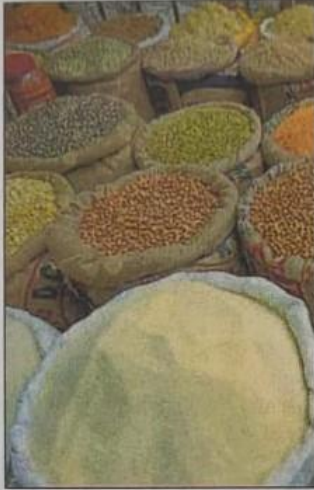
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NEW DELHI: India has a surplus of federally held stocks of rice and wheat, and the government could intervene in the open market "if needed" by selling cereals at a discount to curb prices, food secretary Sudhanshu Pandey said on Monday.

The government expected sufficient output of kharif or summer-sown rice currently being harvested and hopes to procure 77 million tonnes of paddy, compared to the previous year's 78 million tonnes, Pandey said. The government's paddy stocks could go up to 90 million tonnes, taking into projections the upcoming winter-sown rice season. Paddy is mostly sown in summer.

"The rainfall condition this year has been fairly good in the country and the production of paddy is expected to remain normal," said Food Corporation of India's chairman Ashok KK Meena, who was also present at the briefing, citing a presentation.

A prolonged heatwave in March affected India's wheat output, prompting the government to ban export in May. The government also curbed overseas rice shipments last month, imposing an export duty of 20% and banning shipments of broken rice, to shore up domestic availability.



India's consumer inflation rate rose to a five-month high of 7.41% in September. REUTERS

Wheat prices have remained higher as farmers found it lucrative to sell to exporters than to the government, which offers cultivators the minimum support price, which is a federally determined floor price, the ministry said.

"Yet, the rise in wheat prices is not abnormal since prices in 2021 were depressed because the government had sold large stocks in the open market and also bore its transportation costs. Therefore, wheat prices were very low last year," Pandey said.

After the country banned overseas wheat shipments in May, exports had fallen to 4.2

million tonne from 7.2 million tonne in the previous year. "So, the government actually has a surplus of 2.5 million tonne," Pandey said. "The government may sell stocks in the open market if needed."

India's consumer inflation rate surged to a five-month high of 7.41% in September on an annual basis, compared to a 7% rise in the previous month, breaching the Reserve Bank of India's target of 4-6% for the ninth straight month, data released on Wednesday showed.

The jump in retail prices was driven by broad-based increase in food prices in September, just like in the previous month, with cereals, pulses, vegetables, milk and milk products maintaining a rising trend. Food inflation leapt to a 22-month high of 8.4% in September, complicating the government's responses so far to bring down prices.

The government's cereal stocks, which supply subsidised grains to 800 million people, have declined to a five-year low as extreme weather pummelled both winter-sown wheat and summer-sown rice crops. Total stock of the two staples, at 51.14 million tonne as on October 1, were nearly 66% above the mandatory buffer and strategic reserve stockpile of 30.77 million tonne that the central government is required to maintain for this time of the year, data from the Food Corporation showed

Crop cycle, quick field turnaround continue to be burning issues

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BAJAKHANA, FARIDKOT: Many of the farmers in this Punjab village admit that they are going to burn the paddy stubble left after the harvest — the main source of pollution in the National Capital Region in October and November.

Most are also desperate to move out of the paddy-wheat cycle of cropping. The Central Ground Water Board (CGWB) has warned them that they have groundwater left for 15 more years — at a stretch. As they prepare to harvest their nearly mature paddy crop, they say they have realised that farming has become unsustainable for several reasons: a water table that has fallen to the "red," or "overexploited" category; rising costs of pesticide and other inputs; extreme weather events such as unseasonal rain of the sort that hit all of north-west India in early October; and the problem of dealing with paddy stubble.

CGWB's groundwater resource assessment for 2020 shows most blocks in Punjab are in the "overexploited" or "critical" categories. Bajakhana, a small village in Faridkot district, is in one such block. The entire region is also affected by water salinity, and high fluoride, nitrate and arsenic levels.

"We have groundwater left for only 15 years in this village. What will our children do? They are already selling farmland to move abroad. Every farming family has suicide cases here driven by debt and every family here has at least

one case of cancer. The issue of paddy stubble is linked to our farming practices in this region. If we did not practice intensive paddy-wheat farming, this problem would have never arisen," said Inderjeet Singh, farm leader, Bhartiya Kisan Ekta, Bajakhana.

"We realise that the only solution to the problem is crop diversification. Farmers also want to diversify but government has to provide minimum support price and the crop has to be accepted in the market, otherwise how can farmers diversify confidently?"

Crop diversification, and the risks

This year, farmers who chose to grow cotton in Punjab and Haryana are devastated because entire crop has failed due to bad seeds.

"Since the implementation of Green Revolution 1960 onwards university scientists and government recommended that we follow extremely chemical dependent farming. We knew that during desi kheti (traditional agriculture) our grand-

parents used to grow 4-5 quintals of paddy in one acre. We were told by the government that if we adopt their methods each acre will produce 50 to 60 quintals. So, we adopted it and now we are in a vicious cycle of complete dependence on the market and universities for seeds, manure, pesticides, entire economics of what we are selling is dependent on them. Now this farming is unsustainable in Punjab," Singh said.

He claimed that their demands

for alternative crops have received no response from the government.

Agriculture minister Kuldeep Singh Dhaliwal said that diversification is on top of the priority list of the state government. "We actually need to stop growing paddy in Punjab as it is not a native crop and is also causing environmental hazard," he said.

According to the minister, a policy on agriculture will soon be announced to address the issue. "The Punjab government will also approach the Centre for support," he said.

An official in the Union agriculture ministry, requesting anonymity, said, "This is a complicated issue that needs a very detailed response. We have to look at what efforts are being made."

Dependence on paddy

The dependence on paddy (rice), especially, has ruined Punjab's water table, and with the availability of water (controlled by the government) governing cropping cycles, it is indirectly the cause for stubble burning.

Unseasonal rain and prolonged extreme heat (of the sort seen earlier this year, and the climate crisis will increase the frequency of these events) have also increased input costs in these regions.

Hira Singh from Sirsa used pesticides worth ₹25,000 per acre this time for his paddy. "The cost on pesticides is way too high for paddy because it is so vulnerable to pests. At least 7 different kinds of pesticide and insecticides are used. Over and above that due to unpredictable weather use of pesticides has gone up. Due to unseasonal rain like the one we saw in late September, the chances of fungal infestation is high. Extreme heat causes damage to wheat. In fact, too much difference in the day and night temperatures also affects the paddy crop. Now the days are extremely hot while nights are colder than expected. Over the years, this too has played a major role in the increase of agrinputs used. We are now cultivating cotton also to see how we can diversify our crop," he said.



The cotton crop in several parts of Punjab and Haryana has failed due to poor quality seeds. HT PHOTO

governments are not practical and I don't think they have tried it on ground. The decomposer for instance may work well in the lab but it takes at least 20 days to decompose and has led to pest infestation in many farms," said S Agreji Singh Khara, general secretary, BKE in Sirsa.

Government apathy

Farm leaders said the government does not understand ground realities. "When the government is not helping farmers diversify their crop, they should at least understand the compulsions for burning stubble. Nobody wants to expose themselves and their families to the smoke from stubble fires but the solutions provided by

governments are not practical and I don't think they have tried it on ground. The decomposer for instance may work well in the lab but it takes at least 20 days to decompose and has led to pest infestation in many farms," said S Agreji Singh Khara, general secretary, BKE in Sirsa.

Pusa decomposer, a consortium of seven fungi, has been developed on the basis of their lingo cellulolytic enzyme production potential. This composting technology has been recognized as the most suitable means to convert and decompose agro-wastes according to Indian Agricultural Research Institute (IARI).

"We have always said that Pusa decomposer will take 20 to 25 days to decompose stubble. It cannot happen earlier. We haven't found any pest or fungal infestation issue. We will check if there is any such concern," said Trilochan

Mohapatra, former DG, ICAR who was closely associated with development of the decomposer.

There is a fear among farmers that their soil quality has irreversibly deteriorated and the rising cases of cancer and suicides in these districts are associated with increased use of pesticides and rising debt. In Kot Kapura, HT met more farmers whose paddy crop will be ready for harvesting after October 20. "Most of us here suffer from mental health issues. The treatment costs are high. We believe that this has got to do with the mix of pesticides we use for paddy because the environmental conditions are not suited for it. Some farmers tried moong dal last year but did not get a fair price," said Sukhmandar Singh, farmer leader from Kot Kapura, another village in the "overexploited" zone.

A failed crop, and spurious fertilisers

An additional challenge for the arid regions of Haryana and Punjab is the failure of the cotton crop and use of spurious DAP fertilizer in many places. "In neighbouring Ellenabad we caught a huge consignment of spurious DAP but by then most farmers had already procured DAP for paddy. Then again the cotton seeds turned out to be spurious. We do not know whether they are in fact Bt Cotton seeds or not," said Khara.

"The sustainable long-term solution will emerge from diversification of crops and reduction in non-basmati paddy. Currently, area under paddy continues to dominate Punjab's Kharif (monsoon) crop mix leading to enormous paddy residue generation.

Setting of targets for eliminating incidents of fire count due to stubble burning shall help to guide the performance planning of in-situ and ex-situ measures," the Policy to Curb Air Pollution in NCR released by Commission for Air Quality Management (CAQM) in July states.

CAQM, in its action plan, acknowledges that the practice of stubble burning continues despite several government and judicial interventions.

"Apart from various directions from NGT, and former EPCA, there have been multiple advisories/directions from CAQM in 2021. There are policies and schemes from central government, which include National policy for management of crop residue (2014), Central scheme on promotion of agricultural mechanisation for in-situ management of crop residue in the states of Punjab, Haryana, UP and NCT of Delhi (2018 onward) — in this scheme a total amount of Rs 1,726.67 crore (2018- 2021) has been provided to state. Another scheme — the Sustainable Agrarian Mission on Use of Agro Residue in Thermal Power Plants (SAMARTH) — has been initiated in 2022. Plans and schemes to reduce the generation of paddy straw aim to promote basmati variety (some basmati varieties can be harvested early so the stubble can be allowed to degenerate); short duration and early maturing varieties; and crop diversification."

According to the report, CAQM has planned to totally suspend certification and use of the PUSA

44 variety of paddy seeds. PUSA 44 is a long duration paddy and hence its stubble needs to be managed in a very short window so as to prepare the farmland for Rabi crops. Due to this, farmers often resort to burning the PUSA 44 paddy stubble. HT reported on June 19 that Punjab government plans to phase out this water-intensive non-basmati variety in the next three kharif seasons.

Government push for diversification

Among several in-situ and ex-situ measures, CAQM has recommended schemes to reduce generation of paddy straw through crop diversification and diversification to short duration paddy varieties, in its policy to curb air pollution in Delhi NCR released in July. The BJP-JJP government in Haryana has set a target to diversify at least one lakh acre land under paddy cultivation to crops such as pulses, cereals, cotton and maize every year to check Haryana's rapidly depleting groundwater table. Under the state's flagship 'mera pani-meri virasat' policy, farmers sowing alternative crops in place of paddy are paid ₹7,000 per acre, of which ₹2,000 is paid after first verification, and ₹5,000 at the time of harvesting, HT reported on May 25.

There is a push for crop diversification in Punjab as well. Market trends indicate that the Punjab government's push for pulse cultivation did not do well as most of the summer moong was being purchased up to 30% less than the MSP of ₹7,225 per quintal, HT reported on June 27.

Paddy straw formation to be higher than last year: CAQM

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NEW DELHI: The area under paddy cultivation in both Haryana and Punjab has increased this year and hence the generation of paddy straw is also expected to be higher than last year, Commission for Air Quality Management in NCR and Adjoining Areas (CAQM) informed the Parliamentary standing committee on science and technology, environment, forests and climate change on Monday.

The commission, however, added that the number of stubble fires during the past one month has been lower than the number during the same period last year.

The parliamentary panel, headed by former union environment minister Jairam Ramesh, was holding its first meeting to review air pollution control measures in Delhi-NCR on Monday.

During the meeting, CAQM informed the standing committee that Punjab recorded 1,238 stubble fires between September 15 and October 15 compared to 1,946 fires in 2021; and Haryana has recorded 168 stubble

PUNJAB RECORDED 1,238 STUBBLE FIRES FROM SEPT 15 TO OCT 15, COMPARED TO 1,946 FIRES IN 2021; WHILE HARYANA RECORDED 168 COMPARED TO 850 IN THE SAME TIME LAST YEAR

fires during the period compared to 850 incidents last year. Paddy area however has increased from 29.61 lakh ha to 31.44 lakh ha in Punjab and the area under non-basmati paddy has increased 24.72 lakh ha to 27.08 lakh ha. In Haryana, the area under paddy has increased from 13.64 lakh ha to 13.90 lakh ha. The increase in non-basmati paddy is 5.84 lakh ha to 6.58 lakh ha. Total paddy straw generation in Punjab has increased from 18.74 million tonnes to 19.99 million tonnes, and from 6.8 million tonnes to 7 million tonnes in Haryana.

CAQM also told the committee that over 200,000 stubble management machines are available this year (90,422 in Punjab; 72,777 in Haryana; 7,482 in NCR of Uttar Pradesh and 39,967 in the rest of Uttar Pradesh). They are working to procure more machines (already sanctioned for 2022-23).

Officials said they have planned a staggered harvesting schedule to improve machinery utilisation by farmers. They added the PUSA bio-decomposer for in-situ management of stubble will be used over 5 lakh acres in Haryana, 2.58 lakh acres in Punjab, 1.38 lakh acres in UP (NCR) and 4,000 acres in Delhi. There are also plans for the ex-situ utilisation of paddy straw as well, including augmenting storage facilities for paddy straw.

CAQM officials told the committee they have issued directions to 11 thermal power plants within 300km of Delhi to co-fire up to 5-10% biomass with coal; co-firing of paddy stubble biomass has started in 10 thermal power plants, they said.

In Punjab, 23 biomass-based power plants are expected to consume 13.54 lakh tonnes of paddy stubble annually and in Haryana, 26 biomass-based power plants are expected to consume 7.8 lakh tonnes of paddy stubble annually.

Meanwhile, experts said the number of stubble fires is yet to peak this season and has been delayed mainly due to heavy continuous rain for 2-3 days in October over several parts of northwest India.

VK Sehgal, professor and principal scientist at Indian Agricultural Research Institute said the figures will gradually start increasing as the harvest gathers pace.

"The peak stubble season normally starts around October 26-27 and continues till November 10. The wind direction may become favourable by this Friday or Saturday and it may begin to adversely impact Delhi's air after that," Sehgal said, adding there is hope that with the measures taken by the state governments, the figures will continue to remain lower than previous years.

CAQM officials also informed the committee about actions taken against other sources of air pollution. For vehicular emissions for example, 5,162 overaged vehicles were impounded between April and September this year and around 119,875 challans issued for pollution norm violations in NCR.



'One nation, one fertiliser' plan launched under 'Bharat' brand

PM Modi releases 12th instalment of ₹16,000 crore to farmers

SHUBHADEEP CHOUDHURY
TRIBUNE NEWS SERVICE

NEW DELHI, OCTOBER 17

The "one nation, one fertiliser" scheme would make quality fertiliser available to farmers at a reduced rate, Prime Minister Narendra Modi said after launching the scheme at the inaugural function of the two-day "Kisan Samman Sammelan" at the Indian Agricultural Research Institute (IARI) here today.

"You are aware of the crisis that prevailed in the fertiliser sector before 2014. Farmers will be never able to forget the time when urea used to be sold on the black market and they faced police lathis for demanding what was legitimately their due," he said.

"Now, urea will be available under the same name, same brand and same quality and this brand is Bharat," said PM Modi.

The Prime Minister also accused previous governments of not taking an initiative to reopen public sector factories that manufactured urea. "Importing urea enriched a certain section of people. They were happy with the closure of factories producing urea," Modi said.

The Prime Minister noted



PM Narendra Modi with Narendra Tomar in New Delhi. TRIBUNE PHOTO

HITS OUT AT PREVIOUS GOVTS

“There was a crisis in the fertiliser sector before 2014. Farmers will never forget the time when urea used to be sold on the black market and they faced police lathis for demanding their due. **Narendra Modi, PRIME MINISTER**

that selling urea on the black market was stopped by introducing measures such as neem-coated urea. "We worked hard for restarting six large urea-manufacturing plants that were shut down long ago. Soon, we will introduce liquid nano urea which will help us attain self-sufficiency in meeting the demand," he said.

The Prime Minister further said nano urea would help farmers enhance income as investment on account of fertiliser would reduce. "A small bottle of nano urea is equivalent to a bag of tradi-

tional urea," he said, adding nano urea would give relief to farmers from the painstaking process related to carriage and storage of traditional urea.

Outlining another new measure rolled out to reform the fertiliser sector, the PM said a drive had been launched to develop more than 3.25 lakh fertiliser shops across the country.

These will be called the Pradhan Mantri Kisan Samruddhi Kendras, where fertilisers and seeds will be sold. Farmers can also get soil tested and avail information

HEALTH CARDS DISTRIBUTED IN GUJ

PM Modi on Monday kick-started the distribution of Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya-Mukhyamantri Amrutam (PMJAY-MA) Yojana in election-bound Gujarat.

"The world is talking about health insurance, while India is giving health assurance," he said in a virtual address at a function to distribute the PMJAY-MA cards.

"The Ayushman Yojana is aimed at 'health for all'. An Ayushman card is like a ₹5 lakh annual ATM," PM Modi added.

about farming techniques at the kendras.

The Prime Minister also launched 'Indian Edge', an e-magazine on fertiliser, during the event.

He also released the 12th instalment of Rs 16,000 crore under the Pradhan Mantri Kisan Samman Nidhi (PM-KISAN) through the direct benefit transfer to more than eight crore farmers.

Under the PM-KISAN, eligible farmers are provided with a financial benefit of Rs 6,000 per year in three equal instalments of Rs 2,000 each every four months.