



The Fertiliser Association of India

FAI House, 10 Shaheed Jit Singh Marg, New Delhi – 110067

Current News

Current news on the latest developments in fertilizer, energy, weather, agriculture, agri-business, logistics, economy, and other related areas

(The views expressed in the news items are not necessarily of FAI)

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WEATHER

Last month was the warmest Feb globally: Copernicus C3S

Last month was the warmest February on record globally, while it was the ninth month in a row that a month was the warmest for the respective period of the year, Europe's Copernicus Climate Change Service (C3S) has said.

Besides, the average global sea surface temperature (SST) for February 2024 over 60th parallel longitude, used as a standard diagnostic for climate monitoring, was 21.06°C, the highest for any month, above the previous record of August 2023 (20.98°C).

The average surface air temperature was 13.54°C, 0.81°C above the 1991-2020 average for February, and 0.12°C above the temperature of the previous warmest February in 2016, said C3S, which is managed by the European Centre for Medium-Range Weather Forecasts.

"The month was 1.77°C warmer than an estimate of the February average for 1850-1900, the designated pre-industrial reference period," said the organisation.

The global-average temperature for the past twelve months (March 2023–February 2024) was the highest on record, at 0.68°C above the 1991-2020 average and 1.56°C above the 1850-1900 pre-industrial average.

"The daily global average temperature was exceptionally high during the first half of the month, reaching 2°C above the 1850-1900 levels on four consecutive days (8–11 February)," it said.

El Nino weakening

Though El Nino, which is the main reason for this weather, continued to weaken in the equatorial Pacific, marine air temperatures in general remained at an unusually high level, it said.

The C3S said the average daily SST reached a new absolute high of 21.09°C at the end of February.

Carlo Buontempo, Director of the Copernicus Climate Change Service (C3S), said in the statement: "February joins the long streak of records of the last few months. As remarkable as this might appear, it is not really surprising as the continuous warming of the climate system inevitably leads to new temperature extremes. The climate responds to the actual concentrations of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere so, unless we manage to stabilise those, we will inevitably face new global temperature records and their consequences".

C3S said the 2023-24 winter (Dec-Jan-Feb) was the warmest globally at 0.78°C above the 1991-2020 average. However, the period was wetter than average in parts of northern India, western North America, across Eurasia and Central Asia, as well as over China, Japan, Pakistan, northern and eastern Australia and southern Brazil.

What's for India

The findings are significant for India as over 26 per cent of its regions have been affected by drought. During January-February 2024, at least 60 per cent of the country received deficient, large deficient or no rainfall with the situation in the South a cause for worry.

Though El Nino is expected to dissipate by May by most global weather models, it could still impact weather patterns in the country. The India Meteorological Department has projected above normal maximum temperature for most parts of the country during the March-May period. It has, however, predicted above normal rainfall for March.

Source: The Hindu Business Line, Friday, March 08, 2024

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Weather Update: Delhi's coldest March morning in 5 years; IMD predicts rainfall and snowfall in These regions

The MeT office mentioned that Thursday was Delhi's coldest morning in March in the last five years.

Light to moderate rainfall and snowfall is likely over the western Himalayan Region from March 11-13 while light rainfall over adjoining plains is predicted during the same period, the India Meteorological Department (IMD) mentioned in the latest weather forecast.

Two western disturbances in quick succession are likely to affect northwest India on March 10 and March 12. Under the influence of these systems, rainfall and snowfall are likely over Jammu & Kashmir, Ladakh, Gilgit, Baltistan, Muzaffarabad, Himachal Pradesh, and Uttarakhand during March 10-12.

Scattered to fairly widespread rainfall/snowfall is also predicted over the region on March 13 and 14, IMD mentioned.

Delhi's experiences coldest March morning in last 5 years

People in Delhi woke to a chilly morning on Thursday, as the minimum temperature settled at 8.8 degrees Celsius, five notches below the season's average.

Meanwhile, the maximum temperature was recorded at 26.4 degrees Celsius, two notches below normal, as per IMD.

The MeT office mentioned that Thursday was Delhi's coldest morning in March in the last five years.

According to the IMD data from March 2019, the minimum temperature was 6.8 degrees Celsius on March 1 and 9 degrees on March 7. This year, temperatures have been seen to be declining each day in March.

For today, the weather forecast agency has predicted a mainly clear sky on Friday with the maximum and minimum temperatures likely to be around 27 degrees Celsius and 9 degrees Celsius, respectively.

Rainfall in parts of the country

Strong surface winds are very likely to prevail over the plains of Northwest India except South Rajasthan on March 9 and 10.

Further, a cyclonic circulation lies over south Odisha in lower tropospheric levels. Under its influence, isolated rainfall is very likely over Odisha, Sub-Himalayan West Bengal & Sikkim until March 9.

Scattered rainfall and snowfall are likely over Arunachal Pradesh during the subsequent 6 days.

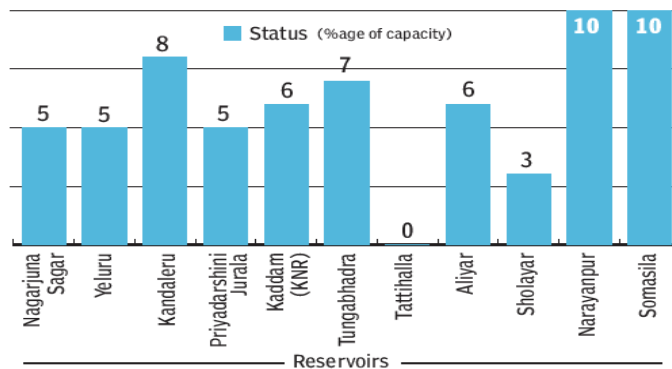
Source: Financial Express, Friday, March 08, 2024

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Water storage in South raises concern as level drops to 26% of capacity

Almost two-thirds of the major 150 Indian reservoirs were filled below 50 per cent of the capacity this week as the storage level dropped for the 22nd consecutive week.

Worrisome trend



Source: Central Water Commission

According to the Central Water Commission, the storage this week in reservoirs was 73.297 billion cubic metres (BCM) or 41 per cent of the live storage of 178.784 BCM. During the same period a year ago, the reservoirs were filled 83 per cent of the capacity and the average for the past 10 years is 96 per cent.

Nearly 50 per cent of the major reservoirs — 72 of them — had a level below 40 per cent of the capacity with

the situation in the South being a little worrisome. Water in about 10 dams was in the single digit, while a few more could join the list in a week or two, raising questions over the availability of water even for drinking.

Drinking water crisis

Karnataka, which has been one of the worst-affected States in the country due to El Nino that led to deficient rainfall in the State, has 26 per cent below normal storage with its capital Bengaluru complaining that a few areas have run out of groundwater. The situation in Andhra Pradesh is of concern as the water level is 62 per cent below normal — the highest in the country — while reservoirs jointly owned by Telangana and Andhra Pradesh are filled 53 per cent below normal.

With no rains forecast in the South for now, things could turn grim until the south-west monsoon sets in around June 1 and the reservoirs may not begin to witness inflows at least until July-end. This could put pressure on *zaid* or summer crops besides kharif sowing, experts said. According to CWC weekly bulletin on live storage status of the major reservoirs, the water level in the southern region was 26 per cent of the 53.334 capacity at 13.844 BCM. Of the 42 reservoirs in the region, the level in 33 is below 50 per cent with the storage being 24 per cent and six per cent below normal, respectively, in Tamil Nadu and Telangana. Kerala has a level one per cent above normal.

North, East storage

In the northern region, the storage in 9 of the 10 reservoirs is below 50 per cent of the capacity. Of the total capacity 19.663 BCM, the reservoirs are filled to 35 per cent at 6.944 BCM. Northern reservoirs can, however, look to the melting snow to increase the water level in the coming months. In the eastern region, 10 of the 23 reservoirs had a storage below 50 per cent of the capacity. The storages were filled to 53 per cent of the 20.430 BCM capacity at 10.732 BCM. The levels in Bengal, Bihar and Nagaland were below normal.

Of the 49 reservoirs in the western region, 24 were filled below 50 per cent of the capacity. The storage in the region was 51 per cent of the 37.130 BCM capacity at 18.825 BCM. Maharashtra's storage was 10 per cent below normal. Of the 26 reservoirs in the central region, 17 had a level below 50 per cent of their capacity. Uttar Pradesh (-27 per cent below normal), Uttarakhand (-27 per cent) and Chhattisgarh (-24 per cent) had lower storage. Of the 48.227 BCM capacity, the level was 48 per cent at 22.952 BCM.

Source: The Hindu Business Line, Friday, March 08, 2024

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GAIL, ONGC and Shell sign MoU to explore opportunities for ethanol import

State-run GAIL (India) said on Thursday that it has signed a tripartite Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with Oil and Natural Gas Corporation (ONGC) and Shell Energy India (SEI) to explore opportunities for import of ethane and other hydrocarbons.

The MoU also covers the development of evacuation infrastructure at Shell Energy Terminal at Hazira.

Bilateral MoU

Earlier, GAIL entered into a bilateral MoU with SEI for scouting opportunities in different facets of energy cooperation, wherein a feasibility study was conducted by a reputed consultant on developing ethane import infrastructure in the existing SEI terminal, GAIL said.

ONGC has a bilateral MoU with GAIL for importing and handling hydrocarbons. In view of the emergence of ethane requirements in India and proposed development of ethane infrastructure, the three parties ONGC, GAIL and SEI have joined hands, it added.

GAIL's Director (Business Development) Rajeev Kumar Singhal said "Ethane has emerged as a preferred petrochemical precursor in India and development of its import facilities have gained considerable traction. Definite plans are being formulated to import ethane for domestic petrochemical plant requirements."

ONGC Group General Manager and Head Petrochemicals Ashok Kumar said that going forward, ethane is the fuel of the future as feedstock to the Indian petrochemical industry. India is adding good petrochemical capacities and making available viable and affordable ethane is the key for the plans ahead.

Foster efficiency

This MoU includes cooperation with clear focus for developing ethane import facilities after gap assessment in existing Shell Hazira Terminal facilities and usage of existing pipeline routes and facilities. The MoU signed envisages to foster efficiency and swift progress of the shared project by leveraging the combined strengths of all three parties.

Source: The Hindu Business Line, Friday, March 08, 2024

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Crude oil prices up as world's top consumers boost demand

Brent crude futures were up 0.45%, or 37 cents, at \$83.32 a barrel at 0110 GMT. U.S. West Texas Intermediate crude futures rose 0.61%, or 48 cents, to \$79.44.

Oil prices rose on Friday, driven by growing demand in the United States and China, the world's biggest oil consumers, and as the U.S. Federal Reserve gave a positive signal on possibility of rate cuts. Brent crude futures were up 0.45%, or 37 cents, at \$83.32 a barrel at 0110 GMT. U.S. West Texas Intermediate crude futures rose 0.61%, or 48 cents, to \$79.44.

Data released by Energy Information Administration showed that U.S. gasoline inventories fell by 4.5 million barrels last week, and distillate stockpiles were down by 4.1 million barrels. Both fell more than expected in a sign of a strong demand. "With the U.S. driving season just in the horizon, the market could get even tighter in coming weeks," ANZ Research said in a note.

In China, imports of crude oil rose 5.1% in the first two months of 2024 from a year earlier, and India's fuel consumption increased 5.7% year-on-year in February amid strong factory activity in the world's third-biggest oil importer and consumer. After accounting for the extra day in February this year, crude oil imports in China were up by 3.3% in annual terms, Capital Economics said in a note, in line with expectations of a demand increase for the year.

"But that growth will be substantially lower than in 2023 when the end of zero-covid restrictions led to a surge in activity in the transport and travel sectors," the note said. Providing additional support to oil prices, Federal Reserve Chair Jerome Powell said on Thursday that the U.S. central bank was "not far" from gaining enough confidence that inflation is falling to begin cutting interest rates.

In Canada, TC Energy's Keystone oil pipeline resumed service on Thursday after going offline and temporarily restricting a major conduit of Canadian oil to the United States – one of the factors supporting prices in the previous session.

Source: Financial Express, Friday, March 08, 2024

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(Opinion)

Green ammonia, fuelling the future

By Sachchida Nand

Ammonia, the second largest chemical produced in the world is mainly used for making fertilizers and a variety of chemicals. Synthesis of ammonia on industrial scale in 2013 is stated to be the biggest invention of 20th century which is helping to feed almost 40 per cent of the world's population. It is manufactured from synthesis of hydrogen and nitrogen gases.

Hydrogen in turn is manufactured from fossil fuels viz natural gas, petroleum products and coal, natural gas remaining the dominant feed.

In order to reduce the carbon emission, now emphasis is on producing ammonia from renewable energy.

Ammonia, produced through 'electrolysis' is called 'green ammonia'. Production and use of green ammonia is part of 'National Green Hydrogen Mission'. Incentives provided for production of renewable power and green hydrogen will also help to reduce the cost of green ammonia to improve its commercial viability.

The newer development is that in addition to use of ammonia as feed for chemicals, it can also be used as fuel. Ammonia has certain advantages over hydrogen as fuel. This is a commodity being produced, stored, transported and handled on large scale for more than a century. India itself will be producing 19 million tonnes and importing another 2.5 million tonnes ammonia this year. There are production and storage facilities at more than 30 places in the country.

Research and development (R&D) efforts so far concentrated on use of hydrogen as fuel either through combustion or fuel cells. It has been demonstrated convincingly that hydrogen can be used as fuel both for transportation and as well as in stationary facilities. Efforts are on worldwide to use ammonia as marine fuel.

While green ammonia is produced from green hydrogen, it can be cracked to regenerate hydrogen, thus working as carrier for green hydrogen. The Centre, through the National Green Hydrogen Mission, has targeted to produce 5 million tonnes of green hydrogen by 2030, both for domestic consumption and export. Even if one-fourth of this is converted to green ammonia, there will be almost 7 million tonnes of ammonia production through this route by 2030.

There is of course, need to increase our focus on research and development on use of ammonia as fuel including emission control from such facilities. The government has initiated efforts to study hydrogen as marine fuel on pilot scale by way of extending financial support for such project. The government should also encourage pilot studies for use of ammonia as fuel in boilers and ships, which is key to enhancing country's energy security and meeting our climate goals.

The writer is former Additional Director General, Fertiliser Association of India. Views expressed are personal

Source: The Hindu Business Line, Friday, March 08, 2024

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AGRICULTURE

Maize prices rise on robust poultry demand

The poultry feed prices is currently ruling around Rs 40,000/tonne against Rs 36,000/tonne prevailed three month back.

Rising demand from poultry industry and the government's thrust on ethanol production have pushed mandi prices of maize by 20% to Rs 26,500/tonne from Rs 22,000/tonne in the last three months. Trade sources said that prices are ruling higher than the minimum support price (MSP) of Rs 2090/quintal for the current crop years (2023-24) as the poultry sector which is witnessing growth rate of around 8% annually while the increase in maize output has not in commiserate with the demand.

Higher maize prices have pushed up poultry feed costs as well, sources said.

"Any further increase in maize prices will increase feed costs which will further increase cost of production of broiler and eggs," Ricky Thaper, Treasurer, Poultry Federation of India, told FE.

The poultry feed prices is currently ruling around Rs 40,000/tonne against Rs 36,000/tonne prevailed three month back.

The composition of animal feed is 65-70% is energy source mostly from maize, bajra and broken rice while rest is protein source mostly from soybean meal, groundnut extraction and mustard deoil cake.

While globally maize is the primary feed-stock for ethanol production, it is used in India mostly for animal feed and industrial use.

To meet rising demand from animal feed and bio-fuel makers, the government is targeting to increase production of maize by 10% to 42 million tonne (MT) by 2025-26 from 38 MT in 2022-23 crop year (July-June) through initiating measures such as crop diversification, cluster development for ethanol plants and involving private sector in seed development.

Currently 10.74 million hectare (MH) is under maize output and the aim is to expand area by one MH in the next couple of years.

Under the crop diversification paddy, the focus is being given to divert paddy grown in Indo-Gangetic plains and north-western plans to maize.

Ramesh Chand, member, Niti Aayog has earkier stated there is a need to increase maize productivity to meet the target demand for ethanol production.

For increasing productivity, the agriculture ministry is focussing on improving kharif output through increasing use of climate resilient and pest resistant seeds and increasing area under hybrids.

Maize is grown during both kharif and rabi seasons. Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra have close to 40% share in total output.

About 60-65% of the output of maize is used as poultry and animal feed while 20% is used for industrial use. Maize is the third most key cereal crop after rice and wheat.

Source: Financial Express, Friday, March 08, 2024

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Onion output pegged 15% lower, potato 2% down

Inflation worries. Agriculture Ministry projects fall in vegetables production to 209.39 mt but rise in fruits output to 112.08 mt

The Ministry for Agriculture and Farmers' Welfare has projected a flat production of the country's horticulture crop. However, this could help the agriculture sector to grow after the foodgrains output was estimated lower last week.

Horticulture production (million tonnes)			
	2022-23	2023-24	% Change
Total vegetables	212.55	209.39	-1.5
Total fruits	110.21	112.08	1.7
Tomato	20.43	20.82	1.9
Onion	30.21	25.47	-15.7
Potato	60.14	58.99	-1.9

Source: Agriculture Ministry

The agriculture sector has been witnessing an annual growth of 4.6 per cent over the past six years. However, an estimated drop in onion production could be a concern for prices.

The total production of all horticulture crops including fruits, vegetables, aromatic and medicinal (fruits and herbs), flowers, honey, plantation crops (arecanut, cashewnut, cocoa, coconut) and spices has been

pegged at 355.25 million tonnes (mt) in 2023-24 against 355.48 mt (final estimate) in the previous year.

Area up a tad

Releasing the first estimate for this year, the Agriculture Ministry said the area under horticulture crops has seen a marginal rise at 28.77 million hectares (mh) in 2023-24 from 28.44 mh the previous year. Officials said there is a possibility of upward revision in subsequent estimates for production.

Foodgrains production of rabi and kharif seasons (*Zaid* season excluded) is estimated at 309.35 mt in 2023-24 against 313.55 mt a year ago.

In 2022-23, the horticulture production was estimated at 350.87 mt in the first estimate, 351.92 mt in second estimate and 355.25 mt in the third estimate. "Despite a drop in onion and potato, this year's total output is at same level as last year's third advance estimate. If no calamity takes place over the next few months (until June), the production will touch another record," an official said.

However, the onion production in 2023-24 is estimated to dip by 15.7 per cent to 25.47 mt from 30.21 mt the previous year, the ministry said in a statement. The Government has attributed the overall fall to lower production of by 3.43 mt in Maharashtra, 1 mt in Karnataka, 0.35 mt in Andhra Pradesh and 0.31 mt in Rajasthan. Onion production was 31.69 mt in 2021-22.

Bengal drags potato

The Centre is continuing its policy of restricting exports from India and also selling at ₹25/kg from buffer stock at select places where prices are high. Though there is a bumper production of late kharif crop, resulting in lower prices for a few weeks in January-February, of late prices have started moving up due to a over 45 per cent drop in production of rabi season crop in Maharashtra, sources said. Potato production in 2023-24 is expected to be around 58.99 mt down 2 per cent from 60.14 mt in the previous year due to a decline in its output mainly in West Bengal.

As per the data, production of all vegetables is estimated to fall to 209.39 mt from 212.55 mt and output of fruits is expected to touch 112.08 mt in 2023-24 from 110.21 mt in 2022-23 (Final Estimates). The Government expects increase in the production of cabbage, cauliflower, pumpkin, tapioca, tomato, and some other vegetables. Similarly, rise in output of banana, mandarin and mango is also expected in 2023-24. The Ministry said that tomato production is expected to rise to 20.82 mt from 20.43 mt last year. The Ministry has released the first advance estimates of 2023-24 three months in advance as normally it used to be announced around June. It said the estimates have been arrived of various horticultural crops on the basis of information received from states and other government agencies.

Source: The Hindu Business Line, Friday, March 08, 2024

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FUELLED BY DOMESTIC DEMAND AND INCREASING EXPORTS...

Fruit for Thought: Farmers Turn to Cultivation of Exotic Varieties

These offer up to 50% more returns : Experts

Ishaan Gera & Shambhavi Anand

New Delhi: Indian farmers are rapidly adopting the cultivation of exotic and premium fruits like avocados, blueberries, dragon fruit, and kiwis, fuelled by their growing preference in the domestic market and burgeoning exports.

These fruits offer up to 50% higher returns than other local fruits, according to experts. "Over the last five years, farmers and entrepreneurs have realised the potential of the exotic fruits and vegetables market," said Ishaan Gera, co-founder of Indo-Israel Avocado.

said Purnima Khandelwal, chief executive of In Farms, a large exporter of horticulture products.

Khandelwal said this was manifested in initiatives to grow dragon fruit, seedless watermelon, blueberries, red grapes, passionfruit, avocados and kiwi.

Recognising the market potential, the Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers Welfare has identified ten globally popular exotic fruit crops of commercial importance - avocado, blueberry, dragon fruit, figs, kiwi, mangosteen, persimmon, passion fruits, rambutans and strawberries, and directed state horticulture departments to expand the area under cultivation of these crops.

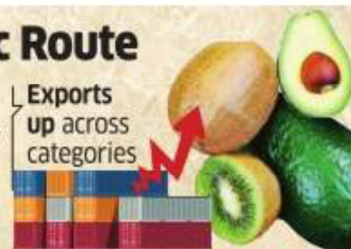
In 2023, the total area under cultivation for dragon fruit

Taking the Exotic Route

Trade in exotic items has gone up

India's production of kiwis, avocados, and dragon fruit has jumped

Exports up across categories



EXPORTS, IN TONNES

	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Kiwis	7.8	41.39	63.36	116.81	134	527.95
Avocados	2.2	0.16	1.14	35.18	24.09	14.78
Assorted canned vegetables	396.13	1,023.27	1,591.23	1,620.85	2,330.19	2,773.92

stood at 3,000 hectares. With increased demand, the government expects this to rise to up to 60,000 hectares in five years' time, the Ministry of Agriculture said.

wi fruit cultivation in India is 5,000 hectares, yielding 16,000 MT production in FY2023, compared to negligible production in 2010, agriculture ministry data showed.

Producers and marketers for exotic fruits in India believe that the market at an estimated \$300 per acre with new demand emerging from the top four tourism, state capitals and tourist spots.

"With so many tourists around, exotic fruits are really popular in tourist spots such as Goa, Delhi, Mumbai are also among the biggest consumers of these items," Harshit Godha, founder of Indo Israel Avocado, which helps farmers grow avocados.

Experts say India's varied agro-climatic conditions are a major factor driving local production of exotic items.

"(With such varied agro-climatic conditions) Northeast is growing kiwi, Himachal Pradesh is growing new varieties of apple, Madhya Pradesh is growing guava, Gujarat is growing mango, and the

and Andhra Pradesh is growing avocado," Khandelwal said.

LUCRATIVE EXPORT MARKET

Increased production is also propelling exports, albeit at a slow pace. India had been exporting primarily to neighbouring countries but has now found markets in the UAE, Saudi Arabia and Canada for some of these fruits. India's kiwi exports jumped to 528 tonnes in 2023 from just 0.35 tonnes six years ago.

Indo Israel Avocado, which imports avocado plants for farmers, has seen a huge demand for fruit. "In the last three years, our total imports were 10,000 avocado plants. But in 2024 (calendar year), just the first consignment was 10,000 avocado plants," said Godha.

Govt raises jute MSP by ₹285/quintal

The Cabinet Committee on Economic Affairs on Thursday approved ₹285/quintal hike in the minimum support price (MSP) for raw jute to ₹5,335/quintal for the 2024-25 season as against ₹5,050/quintal for the 2023-24.

Announcing the decision after the Cabinet approval, Textile Minister Piyush Goyal said that the new MSP of raw jute (TDN-3 equivalent to earlier TD-5 grade) is 65 per cent more than its estimated cost of production. He said the decision will greatly benefit farmers in eastern states, especially in West Bengal.

In the current season 2023-24, the government has procured a record quantity of over 6.24 lakh bales (each bale weighs 180 kg) of raw jute at the cost of ₹524.32 crore, benefiting around 1.65 lakh farmers.

The MSP of raw jute for the 2024-25 season is in line with the principle of fixing the MSP at a level of at least 1.5 times at India's weighted average cost of production as announced by the government in the Budget 2018-19, an official statement said. The decision is based on recommendations of the Commission for Agricultural Costs and Prices (CACP).

Source: The Hindu Business Line, Friday, March 08, 2024

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PM inaugurates Srinagar plant to produce organic manure from Dal Lake waste

CEF Group, an energy solutions company, has launched a waste processing plant in Srinagar that will remove waste from Dal Lake. This project is part of a collaboration between the JK Lake and Waterways Authority and NAFED, with CEF Group as the technical and financial partner of the latter.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi e-inaugurated this project along with others, collectively worth ₹30,500 crore for the Union Territory of Jammu and Kashmir on Thursday. The new plant will be converting 70,000 tonnes of lake waste, particularly weeds and lilies, into 24,000 tonnes of organic manure and allied products annually.

Quoting Bashir Bhatt, Vice Chairman of J&K Lake Conservation and Management Authority, a media statement said: "We're turning local waste into high-quality organic fertilizer, promoting sustainability, creating jobs, and enhancing the beauty of Dal Lake. It's a significant step toward a greener and more prosperous Jammu and Kashmir."

organic manure

The statement said that organic manure derived from local waste will be readily accessible to farmers in Kashmir, enhancing their yield and fostering organic farming practices. This project aims to provide organic manure to farmers at affordable rates, reducing their financial burden, it said.

Source: The Hindu Business Line, Friday, March 08, 2024

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ITC strengthens women participation from shop floor to research labs to agri fields

While there are challenges around perceptions of safety, size of the sourcing pool and working shifts, ITC has been constantly engaging with all stakeholders to provide an enabling environment that encourages more women to take up blue collar jobs.

ITC continued to strengthen its initiative in the realm of gender inclusiveness across different nodes of its operation with its theme of this year's International Women's Day, "Invest in Women: Accelerate Progress". The conglomerate believes that while a bulk of the corporate conversation around Women's Day every year revolves around ensuring diversity in white-collar jobs, a larger focus is needed on empowering women across every strata of Indian society. Focused interventions include enhancing women participation in its factories, supporting women in agriculture, promoting women's contribution in scientific research and innovation, increasing recruitment of women freshers, institutionalising women-friendly policies at work as well as running large scale and impactful social development programmes to empower rural women.

ITC's new Integrated Consumer Goods Manufacturing and Logistics (ICML) facilities, which makes FMCG products, have ensured larger participation of women by employing 50-80 per cent of the women workforce. According to ITC's Sustainability Report 2023, the company's women-focused factories include ITC's Pudukkottai facility in Tamil Nadu, Mysuru in Karnataka, Medak in Telangana, among others. While there are challenges around perceptions of safety, size of the sourcing pool and working shifts, ITC has been constantly engaging with all stakeholders to provide an enabling environment that encourages more women to take up blue collar jobs. In these facilities, ITC reinforces institutional support with employee welfare amenities like on-site childcare, 24/7 health centre access and secure transportation equipped with cameras, GPS and panic buttons.

Fostering diversity in scientific research and innovation, the ITC Life Sciences and Technology Centre (LSTC) employs a 47 per cent women workforce and aims to achieve 50 per cent women representation among its employees by 2025-26. Aligning with the commitment to enhance women's representation among employees, 41 per cent of ITC's Management trainees and 47 per cent of interns recruited in 2023 were women. ITC has also instituted a host of enabling policies including a hybrid work model for employees, additional flexibility in work arrangements for expectant and young mothers, extended maternity and child care leave, travel support for infants and caregivers during business travel by women employees. Dedicated committees are also in place to ensure safety and equity at work.

ITC's Social Development Programme for Women empowerment has positively impacted more than 50 lakh women till date, constituting 78 per cent of the total beneficiaries under its various initiatives. Over 6,500 women-focused Self-Help Groups (SHGs) have been established, benefitting more than 80,000 women living Below the Poverty Line. This initiative aims to link them with formal credit and foster inclusive growth. ITC has also invested in creating women entrepreneurs through initiatives like Women Farmer Collectives, which leverage the strength of collectives to establish agricultural enterprises for landless and women farmers. Nearly 300 Farmer Field Schools (FFS) empower women with knowledge and technologies, enabling them to provide advisories on sustainable agricultural practices.

Women have been empowered as Krishi Sakhis to support women in agriculture, Yojana Sakhis for government scheme awareness, Pashu Sakhis in goat farming. They have also been enabled to run nurseries, participate in Water User Groups, manage forestry groups and partake in all-women FPOs (Farmers Producer Organisation) under the ITCMAARS (Meta Market for Advanced Agricultural Services), a one stop agri-advisory and agtech platform for farmers. ITC's Vocational Training Programme has empowered over 38,000 women. The Swasthya Choupal, an all-women initiative by the company, comprises a network of 430 rural women trained as Village Health Champions. They reach out to nearly 1.16 lakh women and adolescent girls in more than 650 villages. The Mother and Child Health initiative, covering over 6.8 lakh beneficiaries, focuses on improving the health and nutrition status of women, adolescents and children in the catchment areas of ITC's operations.

Source: Financial Express, Friday, March 08, 2024

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Maharashtra sugar production down 4% so far this season

Sugar mills in Maharashtra have crushed 944.82 lakh tonnes (lt) of sugarcane to date, producing 95.29 lt of sugar.

Of the total 207 mills that started operations this sugar season, 22 mills have completed their operations.

During the same period last year, 211 sugar mills in Maharashtra crushed 998.17 lt of sugarcane, resulting in the production of 99.12 lt of sugar.

However, industry insiders are optimistic and forecast a higher sugar output by the season's end. This optimism stems from the current season's higher extract rate of 10.09 per cent, a significant improvement over the 9.93 per cent achieved last year.

Additionally, the increased availability of sugarcane due to unseasonal rains is expected to contribute to this uptick in production.

Farmers agitated

Meanwhile, farmers in the western Maharashtra sugar belt are voicing concerns. They allege that sugar mills are not promptly lifting sugarcane, potentially compromising the yield and quality of the crop.

Furthermore, farmers claim that sugarcane cutters are demanding additional payments, hampering harvesting efforts. Despite these challenges, the mills have reportedly been unresponsive to farmers' grievances. Compounding these issues is the prevailing water scarcity, particularly acute in Marathwada and Vidarbha regions.

Local authorities have redirected water supply from agriculture to prioritise drinking water needs, resulting in sugarcane drying up in several areas. This situation has further fuelled farmers' frustrations and added to their woes.

In response to these challenges, stakeholders are calling for improved coordination between sugar mills and farmers to ensure timely and fair practices in sugarcane procurement.

Addressing water scarcity issues, especially in the drought-prone regions, is also deemed critical to sustaining the sugar industry and supporting the livelihoods of farmers in Maharashtra, said Dhananjay Bhosale, a farmer.

Source: The Hindu Business Line, Friday, March 08, 2024

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Centre increases outlay for Tea Development & Promotion Scheme

To extend greater support to the tea sector, the outlay for the Tea Development and Promotion Scheme has been increased by 82 per cent to ₹528.97 crore for the next two financial years, according to the Commerce Department.

The scheme has a special focus on development of self-help groups and farmer-producer organisations, according to Amardeep Singh Bhatia, Additional Secretary in the Department of Commerce. Under the scheme, the setting up of 800 SHGs and 330 FPO has been proposed in the next two financial years (2024-26) and the outlay for this has been increased to ₹105.5 crore from ₹2.7 crore, Bhatia said.

GI Teas

A significant increase in outlay has been made to promote Indian tea in both domestic and international markets, Bhatia added.

Focus will also be on extensive promotion campaigns for 'Indian Tea', including Darjeeling and other GI Teas, in international markets & generic tea promotion campaigns in domestic markets.

A new sub component for encouraging setting up of blending and packaging units has been included with an outlay of ₹40 Crore.

"The objective is to increase exports, especially in value-added segments and consumption of quality tea," Bhatia said.

Indian tea exporters are facing a tough time because of militant group Houthi's attack on shipments in the Red Sea and exports this year have suffered.

Source: The Hindu Business Line, Friday, March 08, 2024

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ECONOMY

Moody's raises India growth estimate to 8% for FY24

Government capital expenditure and strong domestic consumption will underpin India's economic growth, it said.

International rating agency Moody's on Thursday raised India's economic growth forecast to 8% for FY24 from 6.6% on the back of strong domestic consumption and capital expenditure by the government.

On Wednesday, RBI governor Shaktikanta Das said the real GDP growth likely to exceed the government's second advance estimate of 7.6% for FY24 and move closer to 8%.

"We expect India to be the fastest-growing economy among major G20 countries, with its real GDP growth to accelerate to around 8% in the fiscal year ending March 2024 from 7% in fiscal 2022-23," Moody's said in a report.

Government capital expenditure and strong domestic consumption will underpin India's economic growth, it said.

"Moreover, India is poised to benefit from increased global trade and investment opportunities arising from companies' strategies to diversify away from China," the agency said.

"We expect India's inflation rate will decline to 5.5% in fiscal 2023-24 from a peak of 6.7% in fiscal 2022-23, and further disinflation will support monetary easing going forward."

The agency said Indian banks' nonperforming loan (NPL) ratios will continue to fall as the operating environment improves. The systemwide NPL ratio dropped to 3.2% as of the end of September 2023 from a peak of 11.2% at the end of March 2018 because of recoveries and write-offs of legacy problem loans.

Source: Financial Express, Friday, March 08, 2024

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India in talks with ASEAN for better market access, flexible rules of origin

FTA Review. 'ASEAN too has its wants; New Delhi must strive to strike a balance to narrow trade deficit with bloc'

India is negotiating with the ten-member ASEAN for greater market access for its goods, more flexibility in determining origin of products through product-specific rules and redressal of non-tariff barriers. This comes as part of the India-ASEAN FTA review initiated by New Delhi to address its growing trade deficit with the bloc, sources have said.

"India had been urging the ASEAN for a review of the FTA as its trade deficit with the region ballooned since the trade pact was implemented in January 2010. The negotiating team has its list of demands ready for increasing India's exports but the ASEAN, too, has its own wants. So a balance will have to be struck," an official tracking the matter told *businessline*.

The India-ASEAN FTA, formally known as the ASEAN-India Trade in Goods Agreement (AITGA), has resulted in disproportionate gains for the ASEAN countries.

For greater exports

In 2022-23, India exported goods worth \$44 billion to the region while its imports were valued at \$87.57 billion. Trade deficit in 2022-23 was \$43.75 billion compared to \$7.5 billion during the implementation of the agreement. The ten-member ASEAN includes Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Brunei, Vietnam, Laos, Myanmar and Cambodia.

Seeking product-specific rules (PSRs) in the rules of origin (ROO) determination is one solution being pursued by India for greater exports. ROO is the criterion to determine the origin of a product and establish if it qualifies for duty cuts under a FTA. PSRs can be introduced in the ROO chapter for relaxing rules for certain items where meeting the prescribed ROO is difficult.

"In the India-ASEAN FTA, the ROO calls for value addition of 35 per cent whereas for certain industries, like gems and jewellery, the value addition that takes place is less than 10 per cent because of the very nature of the raw materials. To get market access for such items, it is important to have PSRs where relaxations could be given," the official explained.

But the ASEAN, too, wants its own set of PSRs for items such as electronics, chemicals and textiles. "India has to negotiate carefully here to see that a proper balance is maintained between the two sides," the official said.

Moreover, the ASEAN is unhappy with the Customs (Administration of Rules of Origin under Trade Agreements) Rules, 2020 (CAROTAR, 2020) rules introduced in India which aims to supplement the operational certification procedures related to implementing the ROO as prescribed under the respective trade agreement. "The ASEAN, especially Thailand, is unhappy with CAROTAR 2020. They say their exports are getting hindered because of it and want it to be addressed," the official said.

Indian negotiators have made a note of the non-tariff measures which the ASEAN countries need to address for meaningful market access. "For instance there are requirements such as food certification, including meat, that act as barriers to ASEAN markets. These need to go," the official said.

India is also looking for tariff cuts in items such as chemicals, metals and alloys, machinery, plastic and rubber, textiles, leather and gems and jewellery, the official added.

Source: The Hindu Business Line, Friday, March 08, 2024

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