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Preparing the ground for precision farming

Sustainable agri-waste management can spur demand for cutting edge farm machinery and crop management solutions

S Chandramohan

Around the world, agriculture is shifting to more sustainable practices. The change is due to growing environmental concerns and preference for more sustainable foods. The regulations and the developments in Europe will affect India, given its position as a large and attractive market. The 'Farm to Fork' policy in the EU, even if not implemented intensively, would force all stakeholders — farmers, commodity processors and food producers — to redefine and reshape their value propositions. Recent reforms of the Common Agricultural policy have emphasized the integration of environmental and climate objectives into subsidy payments.

The global agri-machinery industry has evolved from precision farming before 2020 to smart farming now, which is the ability to generate and transmit data for efficiency, traceability and sustainability.

Abroad, there are several start-ups, apart from OEMs, which manage all farm operations, provide agronomic decision support as well as manage the

profits and losses of the farmer.

In India, most of the innovations in the past few years have been around supply chain, and largely involving last-mile connectivity between farmers and customers. There are only few instances where precision farming solutions are being offered, and due to cost considerations these are yet to take off.

FUNDING AGRICULTURE START-UPS

The government's recent announcement of a ₹750-crore blended fund for agri start-ups and rural enterprises would hopefully change the scenario in the years to come.

Annually, India generates 500 million tonnes of agricultural residue, offering a substantial business opportunity of around ₹50,000 crore. Nearly 200 million tonnes of this resource remain unused, often resulting in its being burnt.

This underscores the untapped potential for converting agricultural residue into biofuels. The Finance Minister's recent announcement of financial assistance for biomass aggregation machinery is a crucial



TECH. Must be scaled up in farming

initiative. Encouraging farmers to participate in the bioenergy supply chain not only promotes sustainable agricultural waste management but also opens new opportunities for income generation. This will catalyse the demand for cutting-edge farm machinery and crop management solutions.

At the ground level, India is far behind in the area of precision farming. Farm input manufacturers need to move from conventional products to sale of solutions that help farmers maximise output using lower chemicals per

hectare. New precision agricultural tools that enable consistent planting of seeds at optimal depth, pneumatic sprayers and spreaders that can deploy fertilizer more precisely than conventional implements are already being used abroad.

There are today several players abroad who provide software solutions to manage the entire crop life-cycle.

Leading global food companies require traceability, agronomic monitoring, yield forecasting, and improvements in agricultural practices across the supply chain of the product. Low-cost sensors are required to monitor soil nutrients, soil moisture, pest and diseases. Indigenous manufacture of such sensors needs to be encouraged. Our net sown area has almost stagnated at around 140 million hectares and there is little scope to increase it. Intensive agriculture has led to soil and water degradation. There is an urgent need to move towards sustainable farming practices to ensure food security.

The writer is Director & Group President Finance, TAFE Ltd. Views are personal

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Wheat procurement may increase 30% this year

FALLING SHORT. Though it may rise to a 2-year high, it may be lower than 37.29 mt target

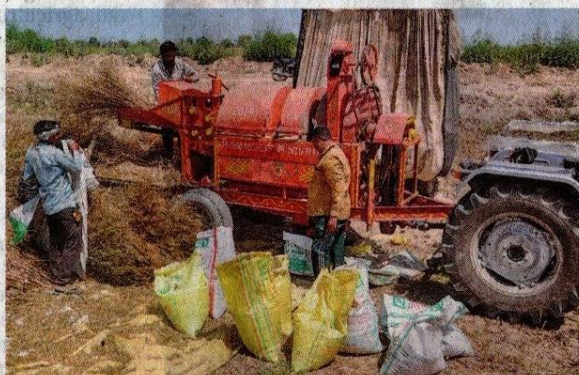
Our Bureau
New Delhi

Wheat procurement by the Indian Government through the Food Corporation of India (FCI) has jumped 32 per cent within the first three days of April. The rise does not include the quantity bought last month. Though the procurement normally begins on April 1, the Government began the purchase early this year and as a result bought 0.26 million tonnes (mt) as of March 31.

According to the official data, wheat procurement until April 3 since it began from March 1 was 0.59 mt, up by 67 per cent from 0.35 mt a year ago. This is encouraging for the government considering that arrivals until April 3 was 1.29 mt, down 13.5 per cent from 1.49 mt a year ago. The percentage of procurement against arrival this year is 46 per cent compared with 24 per cent a year ago.

BONUS PAYMENT

The bulk of the purchase has been reported from Madhya



BIG JUMP. Wheat purchase until April 3 since it began from March 1 was 0.59 mt, up by 67 per cent from 0.35 mt a year ago PTI

Pradesh at 0.58 mt, which is 98 per cent of the total purchases made so far. The minimum price in mandis of MP has marginally increased over the last 3-4 days to ₹2,234/quintal from ₹2,150-2,160, traders said. The State government is paying a bonus of ₹125/quintal over and above the wheat's minimum support price of ₹2,275/quintal.

But, Rajasthan, which also announced the same amount of bonus, has reported a procurement of 9,703 tonnes out of 0.14 mt arrival. Uttar Pradesh,

which last month unofficially asked big companies and stockists not to enter the wheat market until the State buys the targeted quantity, has purchased 2,706 tonnes out of 38,209 tonnes that arrived at the purchase centres.

However, Agmarknet portal shows that the wheat arrival in all the mandis of Uttar Pradesh was 0.33 mt, in Rajasthan it was 0.18 mt and in Madhya Pradesh it was 1.42 mt. Interestingly, the percentage of procurement against arrival (at purchase

centres) this year was 73 per cent during April 1-3 against 37 per cent in the year-ago period. The government had procured over 85 per cent of the wheat arrived in purchase centres in entire 2023-24 procurement season.

RECORD PROJECTION

"If the current trend continues, there could be 30 per cent jump in wheat procurement from last year, which may help the government to restore the original allocation, cut and substituted with rice two years back, under the food security law," said an industry expert.

In 2023-24 season, the Centre had procured 26.2 mt of wheat out of the targetted 34.15 mt and in 2022-23 only 18.8 mt was bought for the Central Pool against the target of 44.4 mt.

While the Agriculture Ministry has pegged the wheat production to be at a record high of 112.02 mt for 2023-24 crop year (July-June), the Food Ministry has pegged the likely procurement to be 37.29 mt in the marketing year beginning April 1.

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Sugar prices may rise during off-season, says Centrum Broking report

Our Bureau
New Delhi

Highlighting that domestic sugar prices have stabilised, with ex-mill price at ₹37.5/kg in Uttar Pradesh and ₹34/kg in Maharashtra, a report by Centrum Broking has said prices can be expected to rise during off-season.

"Sugar prices, which initially saw favourable conditions at the beginning of the season but later corrected

due to the imposition of a cap on sugar diversion, have begun to stabilise. Recently, sugar prices have reached a low or stagnated at around ₹37.5-38/kg in Uttar Pradesh, which is profitable and remunerative rate given we are in crushing season and prices can be expected to rise during off-season," it said in the report, authored by research analyst Sailesh Kanani.

As of March 31, the State-wise crushing data for

2023-24 sugar season (October-September) indicates that 295 million tonnes (mt) of cane have been crushed against 305 mt during the same period in the previous season.

RECOVERY NUMBERS UP

On a national scale, the sugar recovery numbers for this year have improved on a y-o-y basis at 10.15 per cent — thanks to lower diversion. "In this backdrop, we revise expectations upward for sugar production

in 2023-24 to 32 mt (from earlier estimate of 31.7 mt), compared to 33.1 mt in 2022-23. This upward revision is primarily attributed to late surge in sugar production in Maharashtra (up 2.1 per cent)," the report said.

However, UP (sugar production up 9.7 per cent) has seen a sharp decline in operational mills in the last fortnight.

"Our overall outlook on the sugar sector remains marginally negative. This

perspective is influenced by recent notifications from the Indian Government affecting ethanol volumes, with a likelihood of a more significant impact on next year's financial performance. Additionally, the increase in sugar production would lead to higher inventory levels and is expected to exert downward pressure on sugar prices. Nevertheless, we believe that the worst is over for the sector in terms of negative news flow," it said.



SLIGHT DIP. As of March 31, crushing data for 2023-24 sugar season indicate that 295 mt of cane have been crushed against 305 mt during the same period in the previous season

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eFeed's research platform to fuel innovation in sustainable dairy practices

Our Bureau
New Delhi

eFeed, a precision animal management and nutrition company, has launched a research platform to fuel innovation in sustainable dairy practices in the country.

"Our platform will serve as a launchpad for groundbreaking ideas in sustainable dairy, providing the necessary resources to transform these ideas into tangible products and facilitate real-world trials," eFeed's founder Kumar Ranjan said in a statement.

ADDRESSING ISSUES

The new platform has been designed to address critical challenges in the dairy industry, such as the increasing methane emissions from cattle, the detrimental use of urea in cattle feed affecting soil health, and the consequent depletion of groundwater levels, he said.

eFeed aims to reduce methane emissions in developed countries

India has the highest cattle population of over 300 million, and it is because of this factor that many private sector organisations are also involved in research to mitigate the problems related to climate change.

The platform is inviting participation from a diverse group of stakeholders, including researchers, academicians, scholars, dairy experts, veterinarians, and dairy companies, the statement said, while adding that this inclusivity will ensure a comprehensive approach to tackling the challenges faced by the industry.

eFeed aims to reduce methane emissions in developed countries and boost milk and meat production in emerging economies.

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After dipping from record highs, turmeric may shine later this year

Subramani Ra Mancombu
Chennai

Turmeric prices have dropped from the highs of nearly ₹20,000 a quintal a few weeks ago in the futures market but they are likely to rise again later this year, traders and analysts say.

"Prices (in the futures market) have dropped 10-15 per cent to levels of ₹16,500-17,000 currently after having increased to nearly ₹20,000 a quintal. The downside may be limited not below ₹15,000. But prices will likely gain after July," said Ankit Agarwal, Director at Erode-based Amar Agarwal Foods India Ltd.

On the NCDEX, turmeric futures for delivery in June closed at ₹17,390 a quintal.

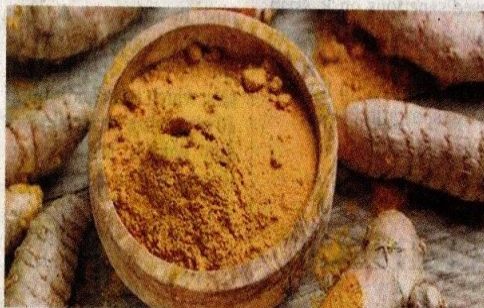
"We expect prices to drop a

bit further before stabilising. Probably, after September we can see some movement," said Sunil Patil, proprietor of Sangli-based Vardalaxmi Trading company.

LOWER CROP

According to Biplab Sarma, Senior Research Analyst, AgriWatch, 5,400 bags (50 kg) of new arrivals were reported at Nanded spot market on Tuesday and they traded at the price bracket of ₹15,000-17,500 a quintal. New crop supply of 10,500 bags were reported at Nizamabad with a 10-15 per cent moisture and in Erode, 18,500 bags of new arrivals were reported. They were over 25 per cent higher compared with the previous week, he said.

"Prices gained as the crop was lower this year. Crop has arrived in parts of Tamil



GOING SOUTH. On the NCDEX, turmeric futures for delivery in June closed at ₹17,390 a quintal

Nadu, Telangana and Andhra Pradesh," said Nizamabad-based trader Amrutlal Kataria.

As anticipated by Agri-Watch, the current year is witnessing price support as a consequence of the reduced production, said Sarma.

There has been at least a 20 per cent drop in production in Tamil Nadu, Telangana and

Maharashtra pushing up prices to record highs, Agarwal said.

EXPORT DEMAND

He said new arrivals are expected from the Marathwada region in Maharashtra and it could keep prices on leash. "Also, there has been demand destruction with many going hand-to-mouth as prices

surged. This is one of the reasons for prices to decline," he said.

Export demand, however, is steady, said Patil and Agarwal. However, Sarma said turmeric exports in January were 14,490.09 tonnes, down 2.17 per cent from December due to high prices. Patil said many stockists hedged their position and have gained due to this. "Demand, however, has slowed in view of high prices," he said.

Patil and Agarwal said turmeric prices could stabilise in the ₹15,000-16,000 region during April-May before heading in the direction of the demand-supply balance. "Overall, the scenario is bullish in the later part of the year," Agarwal said, adding that demand currently is slack as the Ramadan month is getting over.