

PM-Kisan: States face deadline hurdle

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NEW DELHI: States are grappling with hurdles in meeting deadlines and norms set for PM-KISAN, the Modi government's cash-transfer scheme scheduled to be implemented by April, according to officials from states and documents seen by HT.

In a populist step to address falling income of farmers, the Interim Budget announced an income-support programme, PM-KISAN, to give ₹6000 to small and marginal farmers over the course of a financial year in three instalments of ₹2000 each.

Any farming household with up to 2 hectares of land qualifies for the scheme. However, the scheme will go by ownership on official records as on Feb 1, 2019.

Of a total 140 million land holdings in the country, 120 million, or 86%, are below two hectares; the owners of these land parcels will qualify for the annual cash transfer because they are counted as small and marginal farmers.

Land titles are a messy affair in many states, which don't have

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updated land records. In the absence of updated data, many of these states are inviting applications from farmers as the first step in identifying beneficiaries.

"Our land records aren't fully computerised or updated. We have received nearly 6 lakh applications. Now the main task is to verify whether these applications are indeed of small and marginal farmers," said DP Tripathi, joint director in the department of agriculture, Bihar.

The scheme hinges on correct identification of beneficiaries through land titles. Any change in land titles made after February 1 will not be accepted. This is the key challenge before authorities.

States like Assam have sought exemption of the "land-holding

criteria" set by the Centre for implementing the scheme. Assam, for instance, has asked the Centre permission to allow the use of existing farmers' data compiled for the Mukhya Mantri Krishi Sa Sajuli Yojana (MMKSSY), a state-level scheme of the BJP-led government.

In a letter on February 14, the state's principal secretary (agriculture), Rajesh Prasad, informed the Centre that the beneficiaries of the MMKSSY were all small farmers. "It is also to be mentioned that collecting bank account details of all eligible farmers under PM-KISAN who are holding land less than 2 hectares within 20 February may be quite difficult," the letter added.

The Assam government therefore wanted permission of the Union agriculture ministry to offer benefits under PM-KISAN to existing beneficiaries of the CM's scheme for the first phase.

In his response to the Assam government, the CEO of PM-KISAN, Vivek Agarwal, said: "There is no question of exemption at our level from any process of verification to be undertaken

by state authorities."

The plight of Assam goes to show that states will find it tough to complete identification of beneficiaries by February 20. In India, faulty targeting, often known as inclusion and exclusion errors, is one of the main reasons for leakages or misuse of welfare benefits. Many states, including Jharkhand, have written to the Centre seeking clarity on how to enrol beneficiaries.

According to Shiv Kumar Ram, joint director in Jharkhand agriculture department, the state's land records are not up to date and the government has no option but to go for self-certification by farmers, subject to correction. Small and marginal farmers make up 86% of all landowning farmers, as per official data.

A small farmer who doesn't have land in his own name but in the name of his father who is dead without such a division of property reflecting in revenue records, may lose out if states have to wait for updated records. This is the main reason why they want to opt for self-certification for disbursing the initial ₹2000.