

# Centre readies ₹200 bn 'Maha' irrigation package

ARUP ROYCHOUDHURY &  
SANJEEB MUKHERJEE  
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**T**he Centre is considering a ₹200 billion irrigation package for drought-hit areas of Maharashtra, which see the highest incidences of farmer suicides in the country.

The package, which is expected to be announced soon, will provide funds for completion of 108 major and minor stalled irrigation projects in the state.

These projects, located in drought-prone as well as other areas, are those where 50 per cent of the work has been completed and the project has been stalled since then.

On completion of the projects, an extra 7.75 lakh hectares of land will come under irrigation in the state.

Around 75 per cent or ₹150 billion of the funding for this package will come from National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development (NABARD)'s long-term irrigation fund while the remaining ₹50 billion is expected to come from the Centre's coffers. Union road transport and highways minister Nitin Gadkari told *Business Standard*.

"It (the package) is for the distressed farmers who are committing suicide due to the severe drought. A formal cabinet note on the same is expected to be moved soon," Gadkari, who is spearheading the initiative, said.

The total package will be of around ₹200 billion out of which 75 per cent will be from NABARD and the rest from the Centre.

Gadkari said the need for



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the package arose due the previous the Congress-NCP state government starting 108 irrigation projects for which there was still a requirement of almost ₹5,000 billion.

"We need money for these projects. The Chief Minister (Devendra Fadnavis) had sought funds for it and we are arranging it," he said.

A long-term irrigation fund was set up in NABARD in 2017-17 with an initial corpus of ₹200 billion. It was later increased to ₹400 billion.

In the 2018-19 budget, it was announced that the scope of the fund would be expanded to cover specified command area development projects.

Maharashtra has miserable irrigation cover of just around 18 per cent as against the national average of 48 per cent cover.

In the year 2014 and 2015, India witnessed the fourth consecutive drought in the last 115 years since 1900.

An ICRIER Working Paper quoting the ministry of water

resources data, showed that around 68 per cent of the country is prone to drought in varying degrees. Of this, 35 per cent is drought prone (annual rainfall between 750 mm to 1125 mm) while 33 per cent is chronically drought prone (annual rainfall is less than 750 mm).

The Marathwada region of Maharashtra is one such chronically drought-prone region which faced acute water shortage in the 2014-15 and 2015-16 droughts, with an annual rainfall deficiency of 33 per cent and 35 per cent respectively, the ICRIER paper said.

Such was the intensity of the drought that the state government had to run special trains called 'Jaldoot Express' to transport almost 2595 lakh litres of water to Latur district of Marathwada at a state expenditure of ₹52.3 million in order to meet the drinking water shortage of the region.

Handling the water crisis in Maharashtra has been one of major aims of the BJP-ruled state government.