

Addressing the agricultural crisis – Hon'ble Min of Agri

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You have been heading the Ministry of Agriculture since Prime Minister Narendra Modi-led NDA government assumed office on May 26, 2014. What are the achievements of the ministry under your leadership?

The sole objective of the Modi government is to achieve robust growth and development with the support of farmers. We have brought about a radical shift in the approach adopted so far. It's a hard fact that agriculture policy so far has been focused on the production of foodgrains to ensure food security. Although we have achieved this aim, it has also given birth to particular problems such as degradation of resources like soil and water in many parts of the country. The other sad aspect of agriculture growth is that after 70 years of Independence the sector has left 22.5 per cent of the farming community below the poverty line. When we came into power, the situation was very adverse as our predecessor had not done anything to improve the economic conditions of farmers. Rather they made the situation worse by swindling the funds meant for the development of marginal and small farmers. The Modi government set its target to double the farmers' income by 2022 – the year when the country will celebrate its 75 years of Independence.

What are the other key initiatives?

Among the several other key initiatives, the rollout of universal soil health card for every farmer once in a cycle of two years is a significant achievement as the move will enable farmers to adopt the balanced use of fertilisers, thereby realising higher productivity and also sustaining soil health. In the first cycle, the ministry has collected 100% soil samples numbering 2.80 crores and tested 86% of these and will be issuing cards to 14 crore farmers by June 2017. The second cycle has begun this month. Other schemes such as Paramparagat Krishi Vikas Yojana (PKVY) and

Mission Organic Value Chain Development Programme for North Eastern Region have been playing an important role in doubling farmers' income. In a bid to address end-to-end dimensions of irrigation, the Prime Minister Krishi Sinchayee Yojana (PMKSY) was launched, which is delivering tremendous results.

Your rival in Bihar, Lalu Prasad Yadav has asked his party workers to tie old, non-milking cows outside the houses of BJP leaders to see if they cared for the animal. What are your plans to address the issue?

I'm sorry to say that Lalu Prasad Yadav, who claims himself as a cow-worshiper, doesn't even know the importance of cows in farmers' life. Old and non-milking cows are not a burden; they are also as useful as a milking animal. Under the Rashtriya Gokul Mission, we train farmers to make use of cow dung and urine by turning animal waste into compost. As farmers have started adopting organic farming at a larger scale, the demand of compost is also increasing, which has allowed farmers greater scope to earn further income. We have several case studies of farmers adding to their earnings by selling compost made up of the animal waste of old and non-milking cows.

What is your response to farm loan waiver bonanza of Uttar Pradesh government?

Waiver of farm loans by the UP government is their decision. We don't believe in loan waiver schemes. Also, we don't have such proposal at the national level. Our approach is to make farm loans available at a concessional rate, adequate quantity and on time; so that the farmers would be able to invest the same in agriculture and achieve high productivity. We are now looking at warehouse-based pledge loans to farmers. This approach of increasing returns on farming is the only healthy and sustainable way. It will make agriculture a viable and profit generating enterprise.

What is the solution to India's agricultural crisis?

The long-term solutions lay in making farming viable. One can achieve this goal by creating a production system wherein the net returns from agriculture are positive. It is possible to do so by producing higher yields per unit of land or asset like a milch animal and converting that into higher values through an efficient marketing system. Also, the infrastructure storage (dry and cold), transportation (dry and cold) and agro-processing will have to improve. This will help in transporting the produce from production centres to consumption centres efficiently and with minimal losses. The share of the producer in the consumer's rupee will increase and impart greater viability to farming.

What steps have been taken by the government to improve the availability of institutional credit to farmers?

The credit available for crops and investment loans has been gradually increased in the last three years from Rs 8.5 lakh crore in 2014-15 to Rs 10 lakh crore for the

year 2017-18. This will enable farmers to avail crop loans at a concessional 4% interest rate per annum under Interest Subvention Scheme (ISS). The scheme includes 2% of basic interest subvention plus 3% of interest subvention on prompt repayment. Given that about 86% of farmers are small and marginal, and they approach the Primary Agriculture Credit Societies (PACS) for their crop loans, the government has initiated to computerise all 63,000 PACS, which would help in making the loan process transparent.

Your government is saying that income of farmers would be doubled by 2022. Don't you think it's a sweeping statement?

And if not, how will you make it possible? We are committed to the all round development of poor, marginal and small farmers. We don't make hollow promises as my ministry is working round the clock to double the farmers' income by 2022 in real terms. We are aiming to achieve this target by increasing per hectare productivity, rationalising the factors of production like fertilisers, pesticides, labour, water, etc. and reducing the cost of cultivation. Achieving this target will also mean increasing the share of a farmer in the consumers' rupee through various post-production activities including storage, transportation, processing and marketing. Our government has already designed a large number of schemes that would help the farmers in achieving high productivity across field crops, horticulture, dairying, livestock, poultry, etc.

What was the impact of drought on agricultural production during 2014-17 and explain about the measures taken by you to combat the challenges?

There was no significant impact on agricultural production due to droughts during the years of 2014-15 and 2015-16. Despite severe droughts in many states which severely affected agriculture in both years, the government managed to contain its impact on the production. We achieved the foodgrains output of 252 MT in the year 2014-15 and similarly in the year 2015-16. But in the year 2016-17, which had a normal monsoon, a robust foodgrain growth rate of 8.66% over the previous year as per 3rd Advanced Estimates was recorded. The output of foodgrains at 273 MT and that of fruits and vegetables of 287 MT as per 3rd estimates surpassed the previous record production of 2013-14. Likewise, the high output of pulses (22.4 MT) and cotton (325.76 lakh bales) was also recorded. Besides, the market reforms that we initiated, whereby, markets are integrated through e-NAM platform will help the farmers to get better prices. This also will contribute to the growth rate. It is thus clear that our government has a very focused and comprehensive approach to remove the uncertainties at both production and post-production stages and help in realising higher incomes.

Constant price fluctuations of onion, potato, tomato and pulses, among other food crops, are making farming nonviable. What are your thoughts?

Agricultural production is seasonal in nature, and it becomes difficult to strike a balance between supply and demand. It is, therefore, common to see prices dipping immediately after the harvest. One can address this problem by putting in place efficient supply chain management, consisting of proper storage and transportation infrastructure. Also, if value addition through processing is undertaken, then shelf life will increase, and integration of markets will happen. We are, therefore, now focusing on building supply chain and value chain for all commodities, including foodgrains and perishable goods. All the districts will be advised to design supply chain and value chain, for major commodities of the district.

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