

Economist suggests steps to tackle drought and crop failure in region

Ranjana Diggikar, TNN | Dec 25, 2014, 02.08AM IST

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AURANGABAD: With Marathwada being most affected by drought and near-total loss of crops forcing more than 500 farmers to commit suicide during the past one year, noted economist and former member of Maharashtra State Planning Board, H M Desarda, has suggested to the state government that there is immediate need to return to the low external input sustainable agriculture (LEISA), which alone can rescue farmers from the debt trap and uncertainty of crop production.

Desarda, also a professor at the Gokhale Institute of Politics and Economics, Pune said, "Farmers in Maharashtra are hit hard by the drought, untimely rains, recurrent hailstorms and the consequent crop failure as well as crop damage in 2014. The government has declared scarcity conditions in nearly 25,000 villages."

"Drought is part of meteorological cycle but when it causes agricultural and hydrological drought it is largely man-made... It is a failure of public policies to use land, water, biomass and biodiversity resources in ecologically sound and sustainable ways. Indeed, it is lack of resource-literacy which is compounding the problem of recurrent drought. In fact, it is the result of economic policies which are environmentally disastrous. The use of fossil fuel is the root cause of climate change. Not only industrial production but even the agricultural production has become fossil fuel- and chemical-intensive. No wonder, agriculture is threatened by climate change and its consequences. As such, mere talk of climate-smart agriculture will not help to come out of the trap," he said.

"There is immediate need to return to the low external input sustainable agriculture (LEISA)," he pointed out.

In a letter forwarded to chief minister Devendra Fadnavis, Desarda has suggested three measures to address the basic problems confronting the state today.

He said, "First, there is an urgent need to curb all speculative transactions in land deals and grabbing of land other natural resources... To prevent nefarious land deals and land-grabbing, the government should set up a state land-use and transfer regulatory commission under the chairmanship of a high court judge designated by the chief justice of the high court."

He also suggested that simultaneously a state land survey commission also should be constituted to undertake a survey of all the land in the state to record the actual land use of all categories of land such as agricultural, forest, revenue, municipal and panchayat, in public and private possession and encroachments. This job should be completed within six months. In the meantime, all transfers should be stopped.

"These measures will bring all the land and their titles and actual use to public accountability, and it could be a solid source of tax revenue to the government. Even if 1% tax is levied on current market value of the land, the government can get revenue of Rs 1 lakh crore. This should serve as a sure source of funds for all pro-people development works," Desarda said.

"A high priority nodal programme should be implemented to eradicate famine, poverty and under-nutrition and develop watersheds. The watershed work is the master key to solve the problems of rain-fed farming and water scarcity by creating life-saving protective irrigation," he added.

Desarda mentioned in the letter that despite large rain shadow areas, Maharashtra is not a water scarce state. "Of the 355 talukas in the state, very few have an annual rain fall below 400mm... This is enough to meet all basic needs. Of course, this has to be properly harnessed and harvested."

"The most effective approach is the micro-watershed development on the principle of ridge-to-valley. There are 60,000 micro-watersheds in the state. Although a lot of money and manpower have been spent on soil and water conservation, it has not been done in an integrated manner... Hence, there is a need to create a state watershed development authority under the chairmanship of the chief minister. Through this, the entire forest and agricultural land of the state can be treated to conserve and enhance the productivity of the soil, water and vegetation. At Rs 25,000 per hectare it can lead to all-round drought-proofing and agricultural prosperity," he explained.

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