

Deficit rainfall hits agriculture



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Despite large-scale devastation of cropland and paddy fields in the recent waves of flood followed by erosion, the ex-gratia for flood-affected people covers only house and other property. Flood relief usually does not cover agricultural loss and damage in this part of the country. The measures taken by state agriculture department in also not adequate for the flood-hit farmers. Moreover, the state is not brought under natural calamity mitigation programme because the union government provides facilities to only drought-hit states.

Rainfall is key to Assam's agricultural production. However, irregular rainfall is taking a toll on the state's agricultural produce. According to the meteorological department, the monsoon rainfall deviation for the period June 1 to August 3 are: Manipur: -75%, Nagaland: -40%, Mizoram: -23%, Tripura: -15%, Arunachal Pradesh: -11% and Assam: -28%.

It is to be noted that rainfall departure within the range of 19 per cent (app.) are considered as normal activity. Assam has already received 104 per cent excess rainfall in a week starting June 20. While other parts of India remained parched, Assam reeled under one of the worst floods it has faced in a decade. Heavy torrential rains in the month of June swelled the Brahmaputra and its tributaries. The swollen river breached its embankments at least in nine places. Twenty-three of the 27 districts are flooded, displacing 20 million people and killing 124. Agriculture was among the worst affected areas. Assam, predominantly an agricultural state, suffered huge losses in the recent floods. With 2,54,935 hectares of cropland damaged. The crop loss has been estimated well over 50 per cent.

The recent waves of floods not only hit average rice production but other kharif produces during the year. The kharif production is likely to be lower in 2012-13 also due to scanty rain in some parts in the state. It may be noted here, that while in 2009 Assam witnessed a drought like situation or deficit rainfall, in 2010-11 the state produced 52.31 lakh metric tonnes of food grain. During that year, the state had a bumper harvest--a record all time high production of 50.86 lakh metric tonnes of rice. Since there is no sufficient irrigational provisions in the state the yield came by the blessings of the suitable weather as well as timely rainfall. There are wide variation in irrigation coverage across the country with Punjab having 98% of cropped area under irrigation while Assam has just 4% , the state of of Indian Agriculture 2011-12 report reveals.

Almost 2-3 million hectare of cropland in Assam is now either water-logged or covered by sand. Desertification due to recurrent floods compelled farmers to abandon huge stretches of cropland in the two districts of Dhemaji and Lakhimpur as well as Majuli in Jorhat district. It is to be noted that as estimated 29.4 million hectare of Indian soil is experiencing a decline in fertility which is likely to increase in the future. Nutrient imbalance and micronutrient deficiency is serious in soil. About 3.1 million hectare of agricultural land is water-logged while 4.1 million hectare is affected by salinity. Further, non-judicious use of pesticides (mostly in tea gardens), dumping municipal solid and industrial wastes containing large amount of toxic substances (like in Jagiroad, Margherita, Ledo, Sibsagar, Dibrugarh etc) affects soil quality as also activities of the biological system in the soil.

The major threat to soil quality come from loss of organic carbon, erosion, nutrient imbalance, compaction, water-logging decline in soil biodiversity , urbanization, contamination with heavy metals and pesticides and from and adverse effect of climate change.

The Met department forecasts hold out no great hope either. Average rain for the season has been pegged at 96 per cent of a long term average. Rain less than 90% of the long term average would be a drought situation like the one seen in 2009. The deficit rainfall had already affected the sowing of paddy (rice) which is the principal crop for most of the states in the region.

In Assam, tea output was hit in the first five months due to weather conditions followed by heavy rains. The weather condition is likely to trim output further. Unfavorable weather conditions affected India's tea production which fell by more than 5% to 72.54 million kg in May this year. According to the Tea Board data the country had produced 76.18 million kg of the beverage in the same month of 2011. Indian Tea Board recently surveyed the crop scenario in June amongst its member companies in Assam and North Bengal. This survey shows that major tea areas covering Upper Assam, Cachar, Doars, Terai are experiencing decline of 3 million kg (8%) during the month of June 2012 against June 2011. Since the beginning of 2012 India has been witnessing downward trend in tea production. This trend is visible across all tea producing regions except Cachar district of Assam.

This season the sowing for summer grow paddy crop in Assam have covered an area of 12 lakh hectares out of the targeted 20 lakh hectares for the kharif season. However, a scanty rainfall in next two months as predicted by Met department may slow down the progress of kharif paddy sowing.

After heavy or irregular rainfall and flood Assam may witness extreme drought. It is observed that after a heavy precipitation event, there is less water vapour in the atmosphere, and therefore dry spells tend to longer. In the absence of rain, extra heat exacerbates drying and can contribute to longer and more intense drought periods. So it is feared that the eastern and northeastern region may suffer from extreme drought. Climate change in the region is found to be accelerated with large amount of carbon emission and deforestation in Northeast India. The annual monsoon, crucial to India's food production and economic growth, hit the tropical country earlier in the month of June this year.

The union agriculture secretary had expressed concern saying it would not be possible to achieve 257.44 million tonnes of food grains production this year. Weak rains in four-month monsoon that started in June will drive up food prices and erode spending power in a country where more than half the population relies on the rural economy.

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