

INTRODUCTION

The National Conference on Agriculture for Rabi Campaign 2006-07 was held on 14-15th September 2006. The Conference was chaired by Smt. Radha Singh, Secretary (A&C). The participants in the two-day Conference included Director General (ICAR), State Agriculture Production Commissioners, State Agriculture Universities, Senior Scientists from ICAR, Senior officers from Department of Agriculture and Cooperation (DAC), Planning Commission, Department of Food and Public Distribution and other institutions and organizations.

2. The List of Participants and the Programme of Discussions are annexed at Annexure-I and Annexure-II respectively.

3. The Conference began with the Welcome Address by Shri A.K. Singh, Special Secretary, DAC, who welcomed the participants and shared his views with the participants that he felt were important for improving the farms sector. He said that the farm sector has to reorganize itself to accommodate the changes in the digital and global economy. Indian agriculture has to improve its efficiency, effectiveness and adaptability, sharpen the core competency through new strategies. It was important to develop resources, capabilities and linkages to build our productive capabilities. Expressing concern over poverty among farmers, he urged the planners to provide opportunities for them to attain a decent standard of living by providing sustained progress. Acknowledging that agricultural progress is complex and multi-sectoral with multiple support at entry points, development of farm sector can be achieved primarily through increased investment in agriculture, stepping up credit flow to farmers, increasing investment in irrigation, developing effective risk mitigation measures, increasing funds for agricultural research and extension and creating effective marketing for agricultural produce. He urged the participants to think of developing plans and programmes for efficient use of water and its conservation and promoting balanced fertilizers. Most of highly potential agricultural areas of the country had reached the limits of land and water resources that could be exploited. The closing of that land frontier, not to mention acute testing in many areas, diminishing returns and negative environmental effects, very high levels of external inputs meant that future growth in these areas would largely depend on substitution of inputs with knowledge. This meant that future agricultural growth in those areas would be increasingly knowledge-based and the growth in total factor productivity would have to be the major sources of growth in the coming decades. In addition to other complimentary action plans this called for better extension and knowledge dissemination management strategies. He hoped that deliberations in the Conference would help in finding out ways for tackling the problems effecting the development of the farm sector.

4. Inaugurating the National Conference on Agriculture for Rabi Campaign 2006-07, Smt. Radha Singh, Secretary(A&C) extended a warm welcome to all the participants and summarized the weather situation which prevailed during 2005-06 and 2006-07. She stated that there have been deficient rains, floods and heavy rains, incidence of high temperature, uneven movement of monsoon in different States and thus the weather has not been very friendly for the agriculture. She, therefore, desired that State Governments should implement contingency plans keeping in view the weather situations in their States. She then referred to interface meetings held with the officers of ICAR and DAC, suggesting initiatives which could be taken to improve productivity of different crops. She stressed that the country cannot afford to produce below a threshold level for foodgrains, oilseeds, sugarcane for maintaining certain level of food and nutritional security.

5. She gave an account of diversification that has taken place during last five-six years, through which more than 2.5 million hectares of area under rice has been shifted to oilseeds, pulses and cotton. She stressed that the area loss under rice has also to be covered up by improving productivity. She pointed that ample varieties of different crops are available. However, the existing system is not able to handle seed multiplication, dissemination and adequate availability in different areas. Therefore, all-out efforts need to be made to revive the system and the private sector should not be allowed to dominate in this field in the interest of farmers. She hoped that Planning Commission will allocate a fair share of national funds for not only agriculture but irrigation which is crucial for the agriculture also. This is also essential to improve the decreasing investment in the agriculture sector since last 10-15 years.

6. She informed the participants that National Rainfed Area Authority has been set up recently with a primary objective to launch programmes for improving the conditions for agriculture in the rainfed/dry land areas. This authority is likely to integrate various programmes relating to drought prone areas, watershed development, dry land areas etc., for focusing attention on rainfed agriculture. This authority will have a governing council headed by the Agriculture Minister for policy matters and a Chief Executive Officer for implementing the programmes.

7. Keeping in view the low procurement of wheat and need for import to maintain the buffer stock, she informed the participants that special programmes for enhancing wheat production/productivity has been prepared as desired by the Prime Minister. This programme has already been discussed in a meeting by the Planning Commission officers with the agriculture experts and officers of the States concerned. The focus in this programme will be not only on increasing the area under wheat but also improving productivity especially in the Central and Eastern regions. The programme will include various incentives for seeds, fertilizers and other inputs. This programme has to be launched from the Rabi 2006-07 itself.

8. She expressed her satisfaction that the Finance Minister has made credit available to the extent of Rs. 1.67 lakh crores for the agriculture sector. This will help in curtailing the dependence of the farmers upon money lenders. She added that a special package for the farmers in 31 districts in the States of Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra, Karnataka and Kerala has also been launched on pilot basis keeping in view the increasing suicides of farmers in these States. The package, inter-alia, aims at establishing viable livelihood support through subsidiary income opportunities in horticulture, dairying and fisheries sectors.

9. She also referred to the proposal relating to starting the terminal markets with venture capital support. She stated that this proposal has been cleared by the Expenditure Finance Committee. While concluding her speech, she stressed upon the fiscal prudence which is expected from the States for proper utilization of funds. She emphasized that the States have to ensure proper utilization of funds in a given time frame and send quarterly reports as per the guidelines of the Ministry of Finance otherwise there will be problems in further release of funds.

10. The Director General, ICAR, in his address, stressed that for increasing productivity, profitability also has to be increased. For this purpose, he stressed on proper use of micro nutrients, new high yielding varieties, with the help of Kisan Vigyan Kendras (KVKs), Agriculture Technology Management Agencies (ATMAs), State Agriculture Universities, ICAR institutes/centres. He pointed out that there is limited scope for increasing the area under crops. However, there is scope for improving crop intensity and better use of farm implements such as zero tiller. He also stressed upon faster transfer of technology to the fields in the villages for improving productivity.

11. An inter-active session with ICAR scientists and scientists/officers of State Agriculture Universities/Agriculture Departments of States was also organized. In this Session, the State officers raised problems being faced by them relating to rationalization of subsidy for fertilizers and weedicides, shortage of temperature resistant varieties and vegetable seeds, solutions for certain plant diseases, non-availability of minikits for improving seed replacement rate, special programmes for small and marginal farmers, facilities for bio-agents and bio-fertilizers, shortage of organic matter, crop residue management and indigenous GM seeds etc. After listening to the problems raised by the officers from the States, specific solutions were provided by Dr. Kallu, DDG, Dr. Samra, DDG, other officers as well as Director General of ICAR. In the replies given, it was also stressed that there is need for designating a nodal officer for promoting mechanization in the States and doing more research on developing high temperature resistant varieties of wheat for different periods.

12. As regards circulation of newly developed research techniques and technologies available, DG, ICAR, informed the participants that last year they have brought out three volumes and a large number of documentaries in this regard, which have been sent to the Agriculture Departments of all States, State Agriculture Universities and KVKs. However, further summarization of these volumes can be attempted by the State Agriculture Universities in local languages for wider circulation. In response to a

question on introducing the protocol for bio-fertilizers, Secretary (A&C) proposed setting up of a Group consisting of officers from DAC, ICAR and few State Governments for expediting action in the matter.

13. In his address, Additional Secretary, Department of Food and Public Distribution, gave a brief account of the demand and supply situation of rice, wheat, pulses and foodgrains in the country. He advocated that there is need to maintain high level of production of rice, improve production of wheat and pulses to meet the increasing demand of different sector. For this purpose, DAC may adopt suitable strategy so that adequate buffer stock could be maintained for supply of foodgrains under various welfare programmes for the weaker sections.

14. In their presentations, individual States spelled out likely achievements of kharif crop production of 2006-07 vis-à-vis targets, constraints, shortfall and the level of preparedness for the rabi crops. The presentations were also made on Kisan Call Centre scheme, road-map for agricultural diversification consistent with food and nutritional security, terminal markets and Special Economic Zones (SEZs) for agricultural produce, organic farming, role of National Rainfed Area Authority to promote agriculture in rainfed areas, special focus on wheat crop in selected States.

15. Based on the assessment given by the State Governments and the details received in DAC from the State Governments as well as other sources, the first advance estimates of kharif production of 2006-07 were also released in the Conference.
