

Drought-hit tobacco ryots in Prakasam seek bailout

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Against odds: Tobacco growers working on their farm at Vellampalli, near Maddipadu, in Prakasam district.

Ahead of auctions that are scheduled to take place this month-end, farmers in the traditional tobacco growing areas of Prakasam district are pleading traders to bail them out by offering a better average price for their produce, which they say has been grown against much odds.

A prolonged dry spell coupled with an infestation of the parasitic weed *Orabanche Cernua* had taken a toll on productivity, as well as on the grade out-turn this year, both in the Southern Black Soil (SBS) and Southern Light Soil (SLS) regions, said farmers after holding a meeting to take stock of the situation ahead of the marketing season.

“We will be able to break even only if we are offered an average price of ₹150 per kg this year and ₹200 per kg for bright grade tobacco,” said Ongole II Farmer Association Secretary V.V. Prasad.

Drought takes a toll

Drought for the fifth consecutive year had forced them to incur additional expenses for arranging water through tankers to irrigate the crops, he adds.

Last year, the farmers had got an average price of ₹132 per kg. Cigarette manufacturers and exporters should offer at least ₹15 to ₹30 more per kg for various grades of tobacco for them to scrape through without incurring losses, said N. Chimpiraiah, a farmer leader from Vellampalli.

This year, productivity has been hit by 15-20% with more “thin-bodied” produce. Adding to the woes of farmers, more than 30% of the fields are infested by *Orabanche Cernua*, SBS Regional Manager G.Umamaheswara Rao explained.

Crop estimates

Tobacco production in SLS and SBS put together is expected to be in the range of 80 to 85 million kg this year. Adverse weather conditions led to more of medium and low grade varieties and less of bright grade varieties this year.

Crop production is expected to be between 80 to 85 million kg in the traditional tobacco growing areas of SBS and SLS.

While bright grade accounts for about 20% of the total produce, medium grade accounts for 40% while low grade accounts for the rest, he adds.

The e-auctions are set to commence from March 22 in the SLS auction platforms of Podili I, Podili II, Kanigiri, Kandukur I, Kandukur II, Kaligiri and D.C.Palli and from March 27 in the auction platforms of Ongole I, Ongole II, Tangutur I, Tangtur II, Kondepi I, Vellampalli I and Vellampalli II.

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