

COVID-19 has a telling impact on tobacco cultivation this rabi

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Tobacco growers in Prakasam and Nellore districts have begun cultivation of the principal commercial crop on a cautious note in the wake of the debilitating effect of the COVID-19-induced prolonged lockdown during the last cropping season coupled with labour shortage now.

The Tobacco Board has already cut down the crop size by about 15% for this rabi over the previous year's crop size of 136 million kg for the State anticipating reduced global demand in the wake of the pandemic.

“Transplantation of seedlings is going on a slow pace. The extent of crop may come down by 20 to 25% this rabi,” said Southern Black Soil regional manager R. Srinivasulu Naidu after taking stock of the situation at the grassroots level.

Farmers have burnt their fingers as the marketing season coincided with the incidence of coronavirus.

Unexpected losses

Market remained shut during the early phase of the lockdown leading to discolouration and loss of weight of the produce. As a result, farmers incurred additional unexpected losses, apart from poor grade out-turn due to untimely rains in the month of January as the auctions prolonged for more days, explained former Tobacco Board member P. Bhadri Reddy.

The crop regulator has fixed a crop size of 71.34 million kg – 37.91 million kg for Southern Light Soil (SLS) region and 33.43 million kg for Southern Black Soil (SBS) region in the two districts.

Farmers have taken up cultivation of tobacco so far only in 7,879.80 hectares in the SLS region and in 7,000.08 hectares in the SBS region against 14,911.20 hectares and 12,232.80 hectares respectively during the corresponding period the previous year.

Labour shortage

Farmers also faced acute shortage of labour this season. Losing interest in tobacco, a labour-intensive crop, a majority of farmers switched over to, among other crops, chilli, bengal gram and black gram, said V.V. Prasad, a farmer from Chekurapadu village.

“Those who opted for tobacco will have to spend an additional 20% for engaging workers,” he explained. Last year, the cost of cultivation was about ₹1 lakh to ₹1.10 lakh per acre. With farmers losing interest, the lease rent for tobacco barn dropped to about ₹50,000 and land tenancy rent to ₹16,000 per acre.

Meanwhile, the Tobacco Board urged the growers to go for timely plantation after raising seedlings in plastic trays to get a good quality produce. The farmers should also stick to the crop size to get a better price. Late plantations would result in poor grade out-turn.

Source: <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/andhra-pradesh/covid-19-has-a-telling-impact-on-tobacco-cultivation-this-rabi/article33078918.ece>