

## **Agriculture sector in Kerala: Will the budget kill the pests found by the review**

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### **Introduction**

Agriculture sector plays a pivotal role in the Kerala economy since long back. The share of agriculture and allied sector in total GSVA of Kerala shown a growth of 9.44% in the year 2020-21 than a growth of 8.38% in the previous year.

The great pandemic had disrupted the sector and many farmers were faced with severe distress during the year 2021. Lack of demand for the agricultural products, unavailability of labors in the allied sectors, supply chain disruptions etc. made the conditions worse. The revival of the sector is hopefully expected since the covid cases are declining substantially.

The change in climatic conditions and the increased episodes of natural disasters affected the Kerala agriculture sector in many ways. The structural changes in Kerala economy had disrupted the performance of agriculture sector. Shift in cropping pattern from food crops to cash crops in Kerala can be seen as a sign of increasing food security challenge. The declining trend in the paddy cultivation and increased production of rubber and cash crops like tea and coffee shows the recent trend of commercial crops production. The non-availability of agricultural labourers and receded profitability from the primary sector can be seen as a major challenge curbing the sector.

## **Crop wise analysis**

Now we are looking at the crop wise analysis and performance of different crops in Kerala:

**Rice:** The area under rice cultivation in the year 2020-21 was 2.02 lakh ha, that is an increase in the production by 5.7% than the previous year. The productivity and production of rice is observed as 3105 kg/ha and 6.27 lakh tonnes respectively.

The intervention to promote paddy cultivation included assistance to undertake fallow land under cultivation, conversion of single crop to double crop and promotion of specialty rice.

Crop loss due to heavy rainfall and water logging is hitting hard on Kerala farmers, especially the rice cultivators.

A fund to compensate the farmers on an emergency basis shall be regulated for the easy attainment of remuneration.

**Vegetables:** The state had been doing exceptionally well in vegetable cultivation. As the safe to eat cultivation is getting more prominence, we are promoting the self-sufficiency in vegetable production over the past years. Government policies like rain shelter cultivation, availability of good quality seeds, vegetable clusters, micro irrigation and fertigation enhanced the productivity.

**Coconut:** Even though coconut is a principal crop in Kerala, its production is not being encouraged fully. The production and productivity have declined by 0.54 and 1.58% respectively. The predominance of senile palms, soil infertility, poor spread of hybrid varieties, shortage of labor etc. are the major hinderance of crop production in kerala.

Many programmes like keragramam, coconut mission was implemented for enhancing the productivity.

**Pepper:** Kerala stands second in pepper production. The price of pepper has been decreasing continuously because of the large imports of pepper. Integrated pepper development and pepper rehabilitation programme are being promoted for improving the production.

**Cashew:** compared to the previous year, an increase in production and productivity of cashew nuts by 7.5% and 13 % respectively is seen in the state

**Rubber:** Though Kerala remains to be the major producer of rubber in the country, the natural rubber production in Kerala is showing a declining trend over the years. Heavy rainfall is the major cause that is disrupting the rubber tapping, along with the labour shortage.

### Challenges

The agriculture sector in Kerala is facing a lot of challenges despite the major initiatives and regulations. The agricultural sector seems the most potential target area, but the growth saturation in the agricultural sector is one of the major concerns of the present era. Except the agricultural sector, all the fields have contributed tremendously to the progress of Kerala economy over the time. The progress during phase 3 was comparatively lower than other sectors and other states.

Several hindrance that adversely affecting the agricultural sectors are predominance of small landholders- the area under each cultivator is less and the effective implementation of the modern machineries and scientific technologies will be less viable to the farmers. The concept of full-time farming doesn't have much enthusiasm in Kerala. Most of the farmers are either part time farmers or small and marginal farmers. The declining area under the cultivation along with the falling productivity is a prime concern. Moreover, the area under production can be broadly divided as the area under food crops and non-food crops. The area under non-food crops is very large compared to the area under the food crops production. Other major reason for the low productivity in Kerala is the lack of adequate and proper irrigation facilities. Most of the cases, either the fields are underirrigated or overirrigated.

With the decline in the area under agriculture, state focuses more on production, productivity and profitability to attain sustainability in agriculture. The government is looking forward to increase the productivity by increasing the modernization of the farm sector by enduring more in scientific advancement. The rise in productivity can increase the income level of farmers, thus increasing the profitability. Sustainability in agriculture focuses more on agricultural practices without damaging the environment. Being a very eco sensitive area, sustainability in agricultural practices have to be promoted on a larger basis. The two consecutive floods and the cyclone Ockhi had shown the climate change and unpredictable natural disasters can toll the lives and income of many. The disasters had rampantly destroyed the agricultural sector. The upcoming methods and new approaches in agriculture must be made with a focus on the previous year's chaos.

## **Provisions for agriculture in Kerala budget 2022**

The budget presented by Kerala finance minister K N Bal Gopal in the assembly on 11 March 2022 gave a prominent place to agriculture and allied sectors. With a total outlay of Rs 851 crore, the sector received a major support. The budget touched almost all sphere of agriculture sector and gave more importance to the participation of the young section of the society. The campaign "we too into agriculture" can be considered as a good initiative for this. Mechanization and introduction of new agricultural practices will be encouraged. The budget also gave prominence to irrigation sector, which includes new schemes to protect the coastal area from soil erosion and climate change, micro irrigation schemes, dam safety and rehabilitation projects etc.

In the Kerala budget 2022, a total amount of 60 crore has been allocated into sustainable paddy development. The minimum support price of paddy is also increased to Rs 28.20.

Government policies like rain shelter cultivation, availability of good quality seeds, vegetable clusters, micro irrigation and fertigation enhanced the productivity. A lion share of the provisions for agriculture sector has been devoted to the improvements in horticulture. The allocation of vegetable and fruit promotion council Kerala is enhanced from Rs 14 crore to Rs 25 crore. Development of single point delivery system by the strengthening and integration of agro service centers, karshika Karma Senas and custom hiring centers is under consideration. The production of more value-added products like ethanol and beverages from cassava is also a new initiative under the current budget.

An amount of Rs 79 crore is earmarked for coconut development in the current budget.

Measures are being taken to improve the productivity of exotic and indigenous fruits like mangosteen, rambutan, litchi and avocado. Rs 18.92 core is allocated for the production and marketing of this crops.

An amount of 500 crore is set apart for providing subsidy in the rubber sector by kerala finance minister. Steps are also being formulated to increase price, production and consumption of rubber simultaneously

## Conclusion

There is tremendous potential in high value-added crops like fruits, spices and plantation. In order to thoroughly explore this potential, the state must adopt modern farming methods like contract farming, inclusion of artificial intelligence in to the sector, electronic trading etc. regular follow-ups should be made mandatory in order to understand whether effective implementation of the technologies are made. The concerned departments can formulate new plans and projects to consider the condition of farmers affected by the severe rainfall and water logging in the paddy.

Even though the budget is vocal on value addition initiatives in the farm sectors, the debt relief to the bail out farmers faced with recovery measures are not considered fully. Out of the projects worth Rs 70000 crore by kerala infrastructure investment fund board, only projects worth 21 crore are directly beneficial to farmers. Overall allocation for agriculture is around 900 crore which may not be sufficient unless outside investment is encouraged in plantations and field crops. In the budget, a total outlay of 500 crore is allotted to rubber cultivation, which functions under the administrative control of Ministry of Commerce and Industry. There arises a question that whether the money allocated by the state government for this is justifiable. That amount could have been used for accelerating the food crop production in kerala, which is a need of the hour.

Another one is that most of the schemes are crop centred. The current agricultural strategies heavily depending on the government support and private participation and entrepreneurial activities are limited under the current scenario. There is also allegation from the farmers that the amount disbursed as compensation to the farmers are not adequate. Inordinate delay in processing of the claims, delayed fund processing by the Krishi bhavans along with the technical hurdles to submit the claims are creating troubles to the farmers under distress.

Agricultural related industries including input manufacturing should be encouraged by introducing start up projects in agricultural colleges. Effective distribution of MGNREGA workforce to the agriculture sector can improve the productivity and that can help indirectly to minimize the poverty among the citizen.

Thus, Kerala farm sector can achieve a lot more progress by making a comprehensive agricultural strategy which touches every sphere of the sector.

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