

DROUGHT WARNING

Relevant for: Indian Economy | Topic: Agriculture Issues and related constraints

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After two years of relatively good rains, large parts of Maharashtra (especially the Marathwada region and the adjoining districts of Jalgaon, Nashik, Ahmednagar, Sholapur, Amravati and Yavatmal), North Gujarat, Saurashtra, Kutch and North Karnataka are reeling under drought. What is different this time is that it has been induced by the southwest monsoon's failure in the second half of the season. The rains were, in fact, quite good in most of these areas during June-July.

The monsoon's timely arrival led to the area sown under kharif crops being more or less normal. Farmers were, however, caught unaware by the extended dry spell from August, when their already planted crops were in the late vegetative growth stage. The ones with some irrigation facilities would well have saved their crop. In the event, the yield losses from late-season moisture stress may have been minimal. But even these farmers are in no position to plant a rabi crop; there's hardly any soil and subsoil moisture left to allow that.

The Union Agriculture Ministry's latest sowing data for the current rabi season shows a 16 per cent drop in crop area so far. While rabi plantings will continue for the next one month, the trend is unlikely to reverse — particularly in the above states/regions, where the drought situation is most serious. But the problem isn't simply that of farmers being unable to grow wheat, mustard, chana (chickpea), jeera (cumin), dhaniya (coriander) or saunf (fennel). What would worry them more is providing water and fodder to their cattle and buffaloes. As a report in this newspaper has pointed out, distress migration by farmers with animals in tow has already begun in central Maharashtra. This could present a serious challenge, when the next monsoon is nearly seven months away. And with national elections scheduled before that, it isn't the best prospect for the ruling party to face farmers already burdened by successive years of low crop realisations and the more recent spike in the cost of diesel, fertiliser and pesticides.

For the governments at the Centre and in the concerned states, the most sensible option is to act fast. Maharashtra has claimed that more than half of its talukas are already facing "drought-like" conditions. There is no reason to delay sending Central teams to ascertain the ground situation and officially declare drought. Rabi season drought may be a somewhat rare phenomenon, but its impact on crop production and supply of water and fodder is no less, extending to the following summer. Preparation for starting fodder camps, taking up MGNREGA works or making direct benefit transfers to the most vulnerable families should start sooner than later.

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