

85
13.5.14
Pg. 20

India needs to do a lot more to effectively deal with El Niño fallout

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As doubts mount over the impact of El Niño on the southwest monsoon season in 2014, India's preparedness to face a low rainfall situation seems to have improved in the past four-five years. However, there are many gaps.

For example, although the average water in major reservoirs across the country at the start of summer (May 1) was 51.13 billion cubic metres — 126 per cent of the storage in the corresponding period last year — going forward, there would be drawdown in the levels due to the intense summer heat that could complicate the situation.

More, water levels in the reservoirs of southern India are below the 10-year average at 8.28 billion cubic metres. This is 16 per cent of the total live storage capacity, while the 10-year average is 21 per cent of this.

Similarly, the groundwater level, vital for irrigation, has shown a drastic drop of about four metres in Delhi, Haryana, Punjab and Rajasthan, as well as the southern states of Karnataka and Tamil Nadu in the past year.

Haryana and Punjab are major grain producing states. According to private weather forecasters, the highest impact of El Niño-induced low rains could be in the northern parts of the country. Such a situation could hit the replenishment of ground water in these regions.

Grain stocks, though at a comfortable position of 67 million tonnes as of May 1, could be under stress if wheat procurement in 2014-15 does not rise much above 25 mt. Of



Groundwater level, which is vital for irrigation, has shown a drastic drop of about four metres in Delhi, Haryana, Punjab, Rajasthan, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu in the past one year PHOTO: BLOOMBERG

the 67 mt stocks, the central pool had 34.40 million tonnes.

On the whole, experts said India will need to pull up its socks if it needs to effectively counter any adverse impact of low rainfall.

The India Meteorological Department (IMD) in its first forecast for 2014 had said the southwest monsoon will be below normal at 95 per cent of the long-period average (LPA). LPA is the average rainfall in the country from 1951 to 2000, around 89 cm. Rain in the range of 96-104 per cent of LPA is considered

Scheme. Also, small and marginal farmers don't sell their land in case of poor rains but

prefer to sell their labour," Sen said.

The statistician added, it cannot be ignored that only 42 per cent of arable land is irrigated. However, he added: "For the overall economy, low rains now don't have a multiplier effect on account of demand-side factors."

Ajay Jakhar, chairman of Bharat Krishak Samaj, agreed that India's preparedness for low rain in the form of better prediction had improved in the past few years but regretted the near-absence of any long-term strategy to deal with such anomalies.

"For example, it has been usually seen that in the event of low rains of droughts, farm-

ers sell their livestock at four or five times less price than the market rate due to acute fodder scarcity, but fail to recover the same when conditions improve. However, no government programme provides him any kind of shield from such losses," Jakhar rued.

However, Ramesh Chand, director of the National Centre For Agricultural Economics and Policy Research, disagreed. According to him, India is better prepared and better equipped this time to handle any weather eventuality.

"Already, the government has issued alerts, officials have started touring the high-risk areas, seeds and fertilisers have been stocked for swift movement and food grain stocks are also at manageable levels. All this clearly shows that preparations have started in the right earnest,"

ROUGH WEATHER

Actual monsoon*



*Percentage of Long Period Average (LPA). The LPA of seasonal rainfall over the country between 1951 to 2000 is 89 cm. Rainfall below 90 per cent of the average is considered as a drought. The last time there was a drought with rains below this range was 2009 and before that, in 2004. Rainfall above 110 per cent of the average would mean an excessive monsoon. IMD issues its first forecast in the month of April which is subsequently updated in June.

Source: IMD

said Chand.

The advisories and alerts to farmers include the kind of seed varieties to be used in case of low rains, the quantum of fertilisers and pesticides to be applied, periodicity of monitoring of plants, etc.

In 2009, the only time when El Niño pulled down rainfall to almost 22 per cent below normal, foodgrain production did not suffer much, falling by just 6.8 per cent compared to the year before.

However, that did not stop food inflation as measured by the wholesale price index (WPI) from rising by a whopping 6.14 percentage points in 2009-10, compared with the year-ago, because prices of fruits and vegetables soared.

In 2004, too, when rainfall was almost 14 per cent less than normal due to El Niño, WPI inflation had risen 2.60 percentage points.