

Pawar for more use of sugarcane for power, ethanol

Union Agriculture Minister Sharad Pawar Saturday called for optimal utilisation of sugarcane to meet the growing need for alternative energy and ethanol to benefit farmers, intermediaries as well as end-users.

Bagasse, which is the biomass leftover of crushed sugarcane, has been identified the world over as an important source of energy and opens up large economic prospect for the sugarcane farmers. About 30 per cent of sugarcane crushed is bagasse.

'The need of the hour is to step up productivity and improve quality to reduce the burden on the land by going in for combined production of sugar, power and ethanol to enable the industry enter the international market in a big way,' Pawar said at a seminar on 'mechanised cultivation of sugarcane and safety-quality management in sugar industry' here.

With 62 percent of the population depending on agriculture and 82 percent of the farming community owning less than a hectare, the burden on land is more,' he said.

India is second to Brazil in cultivation of sugarcane, an important cash crop. India's sugarcane production has shot up to 316 million tonnes in 2006-07 from 57 million tonnes in 1950-51. In the same period, productivity has doubled to 66 tonnes per hectare.

Projecting a record sugar production of 24 million tonnes during the ensuing fiscal (2007-08), Pawar said the industry would be saddled with surplus stocks after meeting the domestic requirement of 19 million tonnes.

'Though the overall stock will increase to 28 million tonnes with the addition of four million tonnes inventory from this fiscal, the industry will have about nine million tonnes for exports. Demand for the Indian variety (white sugar) is, however, limited to a few countries. Even quality-wise, it is below par for entering the European market.

'Therefore, it is imperative for farmers and the industry to equip themselves to produce raw sugar and refined sugar for boosting exports. The stakeholders will have to strive hard to develop techno-economic processes for producing superior quality sugar of either kind as per the international demand at reasonable cost,' the minister pointed out.

Exhorting the industry to become competitive for increasing its share in the global market, Pawar said China would pose a challenge in the international market as it was setting up 37 new sugar plants to boost its production capacity by 40,000 tonnes.

In order to ensure better remuneration, he said the central government was planning to give tax breaks on machinery and storage for enabling the industry to increase production of bagasse for power generation and ethanol for mixing with petrol.

'At the same time, quality issues have to be addressed as safety has become paramount due to multi-facet application of sugar in food and beverage industries, especially in food products such as baby food, jam and jellies. Sugar is also used in raw form without pre-treatment, where its microbial quality has direct impact on the quality of finished product, shelf life and processing cost,' Pawar

said.

To make agriculture viable, it is important to provide alternative sources of income to farmers by helping them move to the tertiary sector, as in the case of sugarcane by educating farmers to adopt the combined methodology of producing sugar, power and ethanol.

'However, for the farmers to reap profits, demand and supply have to match. When supply is more than demand, then prices take a beating,' Pawar noted.

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