Minister outlines one-year performance of agri dept

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By Our Staff Reporter

LAHORE, Dec 17: Agriculture is the backbone of national economy and the government realises that no programme of economic development or public welfare can be meaningful without according central importance to agricultural development.

This was stated by the provincial minister for agriculture, Arshad Khan Lodhi, here on Wednesday. He was briefing newsmen on the one-year performance of his department.

Talking about the wheat crop, Mr Lodhi claimed that due to conducive policy instruments and effective strategy pursued by the Punjab government, farmers were able to harvest over 15.3 million tons of wheat, which exceeded by 761,000 tons the figure achieved in the previous year. For the first time in the history of wheat procurement, every grain of wheat offered by farmers was purchased at the support price fixed for the crop.

The pace of sowing wheat crop during the current season was also satisfactory, the minister claimed. By Nov 15, 3.69 million acres had already been cultivated, 10.44 per cent more than the area cultivated in the corresponding period last year. By the end of November, wheat sowing had been completed on 10.56 million acres which was 65.51 per cent of the target and 9.65 per cent more than the figure for the corresponding period last year. An area of 13.76 million acres had been brought under wheat by Dec 13. The recent announcement of increase in the support price has further hastened wheat sowing and it is hoped that the area under wheat will exceed the target fixed for the current Rabi season, the minister said.

Weeds can reduce the per acre yield of wheat by up to 42 per cent. Last year, 4.5 million acres (30 per cent of the entire wheat area in Punjab) were treated with weedicides. The target fixed for the current year for treatment with weedicides is 8.8 million acres i.e. almost 100 per cent more than last year. The companies dealing in the business have been told to keep their stocks updated according to the revised requirement, he said.

A publicity campaign has also been launched for guiding farmers in the application of balanced doses of nitrogenous and phosphate fertiliser. As a result of these efforts, the off-take of phosphate fertiliser in Punjab has touched 480,000 tons registering an increase of 20 per cent over last year. This augurs well for a successful wheat crop this year, the minister said.

Speaking about the cotton crop, Mr Lodhi said Pakistan produced 10 million bales while the annual requirement of domestic textile industry was 12 million bales. As part of its efforts to enhance cotton production in the province, the agriculture department launched a project to maximize cotton production in the non-core belt. Due to this project, cotton area in the non-core belt increased by 58 per cent over last year and even exceeded the target by 11.75 per cent.

However, due to continuous wet weather and onslaught of pests, cotton production has slided slightly. According to figures released by PCGA, cotton arrival in Punjab touched 5.318 million bales up to Dec 1 which was 3.75 per cent more than the corresponding period of last year. It is hoped that Punjab will harvest 7.6 million bales this year. It is quite reassuring that farmers got good prices of cotton and had a greater per acre return on their produce, he said.

Ninety-four per cent fine quality *basmati* rice was grown in Punjab and was in great demand in the world market, the minister observed. According to an estimate, the crop size in 2002-03 was 2.5 per cent more than 2001-02 and the production had also registered an increase of 13.8 per cent. During 2003-04, rice was sown on 4.1 million acres from which 2.8 million metric ton production was projected as against the target of 2.4 million metric tons. Not only the crop has been a great success but also the growers are getting good returns on the produce this year, he said.

Minister Lodhi also threw light on the potato crop and said that Pakistan produced 1.8 to 1.9 million tons of potatoes annually, out of which 1.5 to 1.6 million tons were contributed by Punjab. The government has brought together all the stakeholders in potato production and marketing like growers, commission agents, Export Promotion Bureau, Horticulture Board and cold storage owners and they are being continuously consulted to streamline potato production and export to ensure price stabilization of the produce. This strategy would ensure good returns for growers, he claimed.

The department was not only concentrating on crop size in the province, Mr Lodhi said and added: "Water management has a crucial position in the overall agricultural picture. Punjab faced a severe drought during the last four years. To cope with such a situation in future, the federal government is actively planning to construct new dams and remodel canals to improve their conveyance efficiency. Simultaneously, the government is concentrating on lining water courses and levelling uneven fields as up to 40 per cent water is lost during transit due to unlined water courses and uneven fields. Under a directive of the chief minister, 10,000 water courses will be brick-lined during the next four years. Out of these, 1,000 water courses will be lined during the first year and the remaining 9,000 during the next three years. Moreover, 2.2 million acres would be levelled through laser technology."

Advanced water-economizing irrigation methods and techniques will be popularized in the province, the minister said. As many as 2,200 new laser machines, 1,000 zero tillage drills (one in each union council), 450 bed planters for wheat, 1,000 furrow-bed shapers for cotton and 450 ridge planters for sugarcane will also be provided to farmers.

All this was capped with efforts at farm mechanization, he said. Last year, the agriculture department provided 355 bulldozers on subsidized hiring rates for land-levelling and 30,853 acres were levelled with these bulldozers. Due to this facility, farmers income improved and employment opportunities were provided to 2,695 families.

In irrigated and rain-fed areas of the province, drilling machinery was provided for installing 3,873 tubewells. These tubewells provided 0.58 million acre feet of water to irrigate an area of 212,150 acres.

The department has also provided equipment for survey of ground water availability and quality. A new type of machine named wheat straw choppers has also been designed and introduced by the Agricultural Machinery Research Institute, Multan. The Field Wing o Agriculture Department earnec Rs267.83 million through custom hiring services. A project to add a fleet of 200 new bulldozers to the existing strength and a plan to bring 700,000 acres under the plough by improving the land with bulldozers is also under process.

According to the agriculture minister, the Punjab government spent Rs9.64 million on upgrading adaptive research farms. Under this project, the farms were equipped with the latest machinery. An important component of this project is to acquaint farmers with low-cost tunnel technology for growing vegetables so as to enable them to grow off-season vegetables for getting better returns. Adaptive research farms have been established at Sheikhupura, Chakwal, Sargodha and Vehari where tomato, cucumber, capsicum and red chilies are being grown. The techniques are demonstrated to farmers' gatherings arranged on these farms.

The government has also been making all-out efforts for supplying certified seed to growers to improve the agriculture yield, he said. The Punjab Seed Corporation is playing a vital role for supplying certified seed of major and minor crops. During last one year 80,000 tons of certified seed of wheat, cotton, paddy, maize, gram, pulses, potato, oil seeds, fodder and vegetables was supplied to farmers of Punjab and other provinces and Azad Kashmir. In addition, about 8,000 tons surplus seed of wheat, paddy and *moong* was exported to Afghanistan through FAO and World Bank-aided NGOs.

The minister made his concluding remarks on the credit facility for farmers. An overwhelming majority of farmers in Punjab consists of small farmers. They are usually starved of capital which acts as a big constraint on the purchase of farm inputs required for enhancing productivity. Moreover, the production loans extended by Zar'ai Taraqiati Bank (ZTBL) and commercial banks carried a high price of 14 per cent. The present government launched a farmer-friendly scheme of loaning and reduced the markup from 14 per cent to nine per cent. The Bank of Punjab is in the process of disbursing Rs2 billion and the Cooperative Bank Rs2.6 billion under this facility.