

Farmers rejoice as rain deficit curbs spread of Fall Armyworm

Sandeep.Moudgal@timesgroup.com

Bengaluru: While several districts in Karnataka are reeling under flood-like situation due to heavy rain and discharge from dams, farmers in Chikkaballapura and Tumakuru are thanking the gods for deficit rain in their districts. Not for the lack of water, but for entirely different reasons.

Experts and farmers say rain deficit in the two districts has inhibited the spread of the deadly Fall Armyworm, a pest that had threatened to wipe out maize crops. Scientists associated with identifying the deadly pest, which had invaded the state three years ago, claim deficit rainfall had helped hinder the spread of the pest.

"When we look at the multiplying effect of the Fall Armyworm, it has a tendency to spread quickly in wet conditions," said officials at the Indian Council for Agriculture Sciences (ICRA). "The worm had multiplied several-fold during initial showers of the monsoon season, but the affected districts now see a

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It is paradoxical that farmers are cheering the lack of rain. Now that they do have the Fall Armyworm, which costs the global food industry \$1.4 trillion every year, under control, efforts must be made to press home the advantage and wipe out the pest. This is easier said than done since the adult moth is capable of reproducing rapidly and migrating as quickly. One solution is to not plant maize and while that may seem harsh, scientists, farmers and the government will have to evolve novel strategies if they are to win what is perhaps one of their toughest battles yet.

decrease in its spread. One reason for this is the fact that rain has depleted in these regions."

The National Bureau of Agricultural Insect Resources (NBAIR) claimed the Armyworm has also been restricted to maize crops.

"The worm had attacked maize crops, but had left other crops large-

ly untouched," said Dr A N Shylesha, principal scientist, NBAIR. "This has helped reduce crop loss. A major reason for this is that the sky has only been overcast, but there has been no rain."

Crops in five districts — Chikkaballapura, Bengaluru Rural, Shivamogga, Davanagere and Hassan — have been hit by the pest. The agriculture department has estimated that at least 11 lakh hectares have been affected. Hassan district, which has recorded excess rainfall, has seen a 30% loss in its maize crop.

Kantharaju, a farmer from Gauribidanur in Chikkaballapura, revealed that though the pest has multiplied, it is under control and the situation is not as bad as they feared it would be. "These worms had spread across our crops," said Kantharaju, who cultivates modest fields in a small in Bandamanahalli village. "But thankfully the rains have stopped and the pest is under control. I was able to limit the infestation to one acre of maize crop and saved my tomato and chilli crop by spraying pesticide in time."

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