

A Separate Team to be Formed within ICAR for Sugarcane Research: Shivraj

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Union Minister for Agriculture & Farmers Welfare and Rural Development Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan announced that a dedicated team will be set up within the Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR) for sugarcane research in the country. This team will also work on the sugarcane policy. The Minister made this announcement while addressing a national discussion on the sugarcane economy, organized by Rural Voice and the National Federation of Cooperative Sugar Factories in collaboration with ICAR.



Chouhan highlighted that sugarcane variety 238 have shown good sugar content but is vulnerable to red rot disease. He emphasised the need to work simultaneously on developing alternatives. Controlling diseases, he said, is a critical challenge since new varieties often bring new disease risks.



He pointed out that mono-cropping leads to multiple problems, including nutrient depletion and limitations in nitrogen fixation. The possibility of replacing mono-cropping with intercropping, he noted, requires careful assessment.

"We are aware of the challenges," Chouhan said. "We must focus on increasing production and mechanization, reducing costs, and improving sugar recovery. Water use is a serious concern. Under the principle of 'per drop, more crop,' we need strategies to reduce water requirements. At the same time, we must consider the financial burden on farmers, since drip irrigation involves significant costs."



The Minister also stressed the importance of bioproducts. He noted that while ethanol and molasses have well-established uses, new value-added products need to be developed to increase farmers' profits. He also underlined the potential of natural farming to help reduce fertilizer dependency.

Chouhan acknowledged the issues around the sugar value chain, stating that farmers' grievances about delayed payments are genuine. While sugar mills face their own difficulties, he said, farmers remain at a disadvantage when payments are delayed. He further highlighted the shortage of agricultural labor and suggested training and capacity building, along with innovations in mechanization, to make sugarcane harvesting less labor-intensive.



"I urge ICAR to form a separate team for sugarcane research, focusing on practical issues. Research must benefit both farmers and industry. Research that does not serve farmers is meaningless," he stated.

At the seminar, ICAR Director General and DARE Secretary Dr. M.L. Jat set out four key areas the research needs to address: defining research priorities, identifying developmental challenges to advance research, tackling industry-related issues, recommending policy steps to support the sector.



Dr.Jat observed that sugarcane requires high amounts of water and fertilizer. To address water scarcity, several studies have been carried out, and micro-irrigation practices—such as those adopted in Maharashtra, offer promising solutions. He added that current fertilizer usage is inefficient and that improving fertilizer efficiency is essential.

He further stressed the need to diversify crops to avoid the risks of monocropping. Integrating pulses and oilseeds with sugarcane, he said, would not only boost productivity but also increase farmers' incomes and strengthen sustainability.

Dr.Devendra Kumar Yadav, Deputy Director General of Crop Science at ICAR, explained that sugarcane variety 238 was initially welcomed by farmers but eventually encouraged monocropping. He clarified that although there are alternatives, new varieties take time to be adopted. Each variety undergoes three years of testing to monitor disease, insect resistance, and yield. According to him, analyzing the yield gap is critical for most crops. He assured that the seminar's recommendations would be carefully considered to address farmers' concerns. Dr. Rajbir Singh, DDG Extension at ICAR, chaired one of the seminar's sessions.

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