

Plant more trees to bolster Kerala plantation sector: Experts

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Thiruvananthapuram, Feb 20 (IANS): To cash in on the increasing demand for timber products in the market, the state should focus on tree plantation in addition to other crops, experts at a seminar organised by Kerala Plantation Directorate opined.

"Tree planters should closely monitor the market demand to make the best use of Kerala's tree plantation options like timber, fuel wood, and high-value timbers. With the use of precise technology, high-quality Marayoor sandalwood, which has high demand in the world market, can be harvested in 15 years", said Dr A. Balasubramanian, Professor, Department of Silviculture, Forest College and Research Institute, Mettupalayam.

Also, the timely deployment of technology will aid in resolving threats faced by the plantation sector, including climatic, thereby enabling planters to tap on the market potential, he said.

Challenges like severe unseasonal rains, floods, and landslides often result in low yields while acute electricity crisis results in high irrigation cost, said Ajay Kakra, Managing Partner, JU Agri Innovation Ventures, Delhi.

On the role of technology in the plantation sector, he said, soil testing, deploying technically advanced commercial drone spraying system, precision farming, using best quality seeds and seedlings, and practicing sustainable agricultural practices will help in resolving major challenges faced by the plantation sector.

"Earlier, getting the soil tested was a time-consuming process, but now there are service providers who would help the planters with an IoT driven, chemical-free, portable and real-time soil testing device", said Kakra.

Stressing the scope of deploying technology in bringing out value-added products from the residues generated from plantation crops, Dr P Subramanian, Professor, and Head, Department of Renewable Energy Engineering, Agricultural Engineering College and Research Institute, Tamil Nadu Agricultural University, said, biomass or plantation waste can be utilised for producing biochar/hydrochar which can be used for wastewater treatment.

G.K.Ambili, senior scientist, Centre for Water Resources Development and Management, Kozhikode, pointed out that water scarcity has a drastic effect on country's plantation sector as major segment of plantation crops is dependent on irrigation.

"As the last ten years trend of receiving heavy rainfall in short period of time is not benefiting long term crop management, it has become inevitable to depend on modern irrigation methods for the survival of plantation sector", she said.

Dr Soman, Jain Irrigation Systems Ltd, Maharashtra, said precision farming and vegetative mulching are ways to sustainable production. Also, for attracting and meeting the domestic as well as foreign market demand, there should be a considerable hike in the cultivation of plantation crops in Kerala, he added.