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Steep fall in tobacco production this year

Area under the cash crop reduces to 5,085 hectares, sown by around 5,100 farmers

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The area under tobacco production in Belagavi has been slowly reducing over the years.

Growers attribute this to continuing restrictions on trade and use of tobacco products, reducing stocks of firewood for processing and vagaries of monsoon, among other reasons.

Though cultivation has been falling since 2010, 2017 has been the worst. A total of 17,193 farmers grew tobacco on 13,755 hectares of land in 2010-11 in Nippani and Chikkodi taluks and surrounding areas. But this year, the area under the cash crop has reduced to 5,085 hectares, sown by around 5,100 farmers. In these seven years, tobacco cultivation has increased only twice. In 2012-13, it was sown on 13,779 hectares, by 17,223 farmers. In 2016-17, it was sown on 13,500 hectares, by 13,262 farmers. In all other years, cultivation has been dropping. The worst fall, however, has been in the current season with the acreage shrinking by over 60%, say officials.

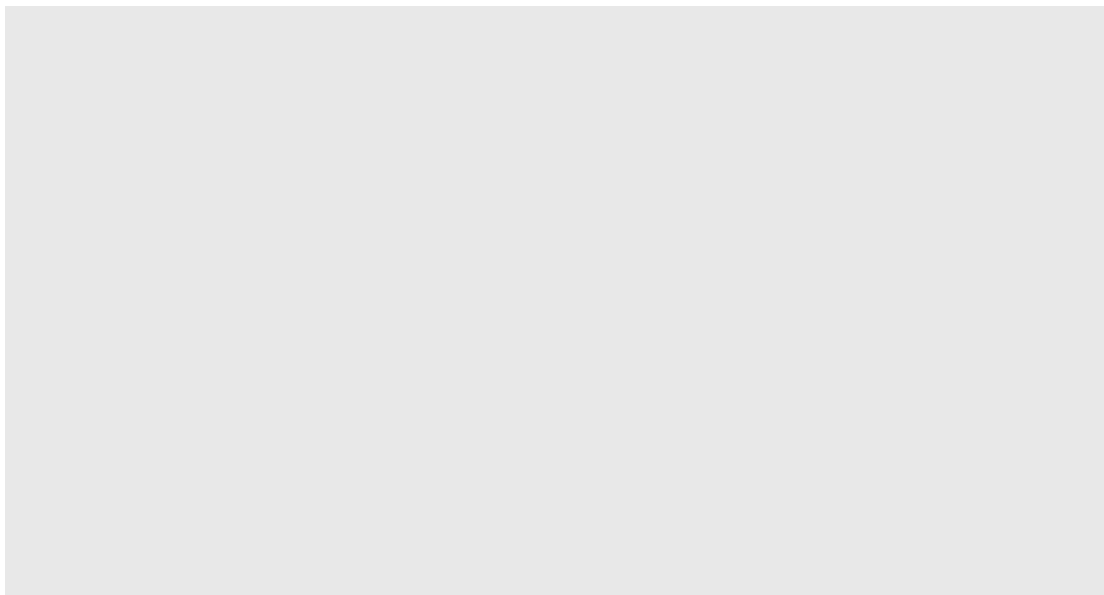
The zilla panchayat sees an opportunity in this. "India is a signatory to the farmer convention on tobacco control. We are supposed to phase out the total area by 2020. We want to do that by exposing farmers with remunerative crops," Chief Executive Officer R. Ramachandran said.

Taking inspiration from Mysuru farmers, we want to promote the growth of perennials such as Hebbevu (Melia Dubia) that has a ready market. We are also trying to introduce farmers to other crops and farming practices such as floriculture and bee-keeping, vermicompost making, dairying, and other micro enterprises based on farm produce, Mr. Ramachandran said. Some farmers' groups and NGOs have successfully campaigned against tobacco cultivation in the Old Mysuru region and the farmers are now planting Hebbevu and other saplings. "Officials working in those areas have told us that farmers who have made the switch are making significant gains," the CEO said.


Some farmer leaders are apprehensive of any government intervention regarding tobacco. "Farmers will find it very difficult to

switch over from tobacco. They have the necessary experience for growing it. But with a new crop, they will be lost," said Appasaheb Desai, farmer leader. "The government will have to take pro-active steps to show that it cares for tobacco farmers," he said.

Officials say tobacco cultivation existed in Belagavi district during the East India Company era. The company's officials had a list of farmers who they traded regularly with. They supplied inputs and bought back raw material from them. Some of the tobacco was processed locally, in ovens that used firewood from nearby jungles.



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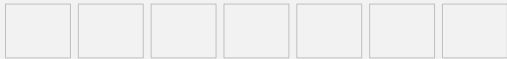
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