New seeds from Sugarcane Breeding Institute, SISMA

Coimbatore, March 22: Even with a drastic reduction in cane planting area, sugar supply has always been in excess of market demand, according to cane scientists. This possibly could be the reason for the lack of focus on sugarcane-related research — the focus is more on pulses and other agricultural commodities, they point out.

In a chat with BusinessLine, Bakshi Ram, Director of the 105-year-old Sugarcane Breeding Institute (SBI), said Indian sugarcane varieties are at present cultivated in over 28 countries, “the only crop from India that is cultivated elsewhere.” Scientists say they have been working aggressively on new varietal releases. One such initiative is the “Sweet Bloom” project in Tamil Nadu, Bakshi Ram said. The SBI and South India Sugar Mills’ Association (SISMA) launched the industry-institute project in October 2016.

The five-year project, fully funded by SISMA, is focused on promoting the cultivation of location-specific cane varieties that are non-flowering and drought- and red rot-resistant. Under the agreement, trials will be conducted at nine locations in the State and evaluated, before it is officially released.

“We have provided 20 varieties (17 of which are from the year 2013-2016 series), and each of these is in the multiplication stage at various locations. Co 86032, which was released in 1995, is still the predominantly cultivated variety in TN, covering 70 per cent of the cane planting area. We have taken this variety as the standard and allowed the mills to choose one more variety which they consider as prominent,” said Ram. “We are hopeful of the outcome. An an official announcement of the release of Co 09004 can be expected soon.”

“Co 0212 was released last year,” he added. “It is drought-tolerant and performing very well. But the area is still low, at less than 1,000 hectares in the State. It could be a likely replacement for Co 86032.”

Pan-India programme

Another variety, Co 0238, is found to be prominent in sub-tropical regions, he said. Similarly, Co 0240 is well-taken. The seeds for all these varieties were supplied in July 2016, for multiplication in a span of six to eight months, said the SBI Director. “We have similar on-going programmes in Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Maharashtra, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh as well. In course of time, we intend to make it a national level ‘Sweet Bloom’.”

Ram confirmed that planting has been undertaken only in 25 per cent of the total cane area till end-February. “It has taken a huge hit, particularly in south Tamil Nadu. The State is witnessing the worst drought in 140 years; rainfall deficit due to failure of the north-east monsoon is as high as 82 per cent.”

The situation has compelled farmers to harvest immature (six-seven months old) cane, as there is no water to maintain the crop and the industry is helping the farmer to harvest, he added.

He conceded that sugar recovery levels have fallen below the 9 per cent level.

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