

Sikkim 'livelihood schools' to promote organic farming

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A "livelihood school" on organic farming, has been inaugurated by the State Agriculture Minister, Mr D.N. Tharkarpa, at Tadong here. This is part of the State government's plans to transform Sikkim into a fully Organic State by 2015. The Tadong livelihood school has around 130 participants from the 15 constituencies of East and North districts who will attend a three-month training on organic farming process. Two more such schools will be launched within this week. The second school will be inaugurated at Daramdin for training youth in West Sikkim on Saturday and at Tokal-Bermoik in South Sikkim on August 9. Each school will have 90 trainees in the first batch. After the training, conducted by resource persons from Jaipur-based Morarka Foundation, the trainees will be sent to villages and maintain a tab on the organic farming practices of the farmers in 50,000 acres of land. They will also be assisting the farmers at the village levels. Maintaining that the State government has made the 'Organic State' target a mission to be fulfilled by 2015, the Agriculture Minister in his inaugural address expressed confidence that the target will be achieved before the deadline, keeping in view the miniscule percentage of land to be covered under organic farming. "Around 82 percent of land in Sikkim is under forests where no chemical pesticides or fertilizers have ever been used. So, 82 per cent of land is already organic. Out of the remaining 18 per cent, at least 8 per cent is human settlements with concrete buildings," Mr Thakarpa said. "The State has a maximum of 10-11 per cent of cultivatable land and we have already stopped use of chemical pesticides and fertilizers in these lands since 2003. So, in the past six years, at least 5 per cent of these lands have regained their organic nutrients and hence, we have only 5 per cent of land to cover under organic farming". The minister also posed a challenge to the department. The agriculture and horticulture departments have 140 employees in the rank of officials with many more junior employees under them. The efficiency of these employees will be questioned if we cannot cover this 5-6 percent of land under organic farming by 2015", said the minister. Area MLA Menlom Lepcha urged the participants to use the opportunity presented by the State government in a proper manner.

State agriculture secretary Vishal Chauhan said that Sikkim has pioneered organic farming in Sikkim. The livelihood schools on organic farming to train local youth on organic farming process in Sikkim are first such schools in India, he said. He said that demand for organic products is increasing and such products fetch handsome returns for the farmers.

Chauhan said that the department will be inviting national certifying agencies thrice a year to Sikkim to study the ongoing organic farming drive and to give organic certification after due tests. Once the organic certification is done, our products will be deemed as organic products, he said.

Since our target is to export our organic products, the State government is consulting with companies in Switzerland for technical support as their support will enhance the credibility of our products, said Chauhan.

According to the state agriculture department officials, a total of 6,929.15 hectares of land in Sikkim are under process of organic certification. The department is targeting to get organic certification to 18,000 hectares of land in 2010-11, another 18000 hectares of land in 2012 and finally to 14,000 hectares in 2014-15.

A total of 50,000 hectares of land in Sikkim belonging to around 62,000 families will be covered under organic farming by 2015, the department officials said.

To achieve this target by 2015, we need trained manpower to assist the farmers in organic farming at village levels and we will be training 1000 to 1100 local educated unemployed youth. These trained youth will go villages and help the farmers to produce organic manure and they will be maintaining a dairy recording the practices of the farmers which will help during the organic certification process", said State horticulture principle director KK Singh while addressing the inaugural function.

Twenty science graduates and post graduates from Sikkim will also be soon sent for a two months training at Jaipur on organic farming. These youth will then come back and monitoring the field work of the supervisors trained by the three livelihood schools.

Officials explained that organic farming conversion is a step by step process. They pointed out that the use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides in the agriculture fields were phased out by the State government since 2003. This period was a transition period as the residues of chemicals in the farms were flushed out and natural ingredients were restored gradually with the use of bio-fertilizers and local organic manure.

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