

Gujarat's tobacco acreage up by 116% in 19 years

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AHMEDABAD: In Gujarat — which has the ignominy of being known as the oral cancer capital of India — farmers in North and Central Gujarat are raking in the moolah from tobacco.

Tobacco was sown on 63,800 hectares in 2004, and this number has risen to 1.38 lakh hectares for the 2023 winter crop, a 116% increase.

Gujarat accounts for 48% of the country's total tobacco production of 8 lakh tonnes.

Experts say there are many factors for this, tobacco is a cash crop and keeps away wild animals such as nilgai and wild boar which may graze on and destroy food crops. The greater availability of water has also increased tobacco acreage.

According to figures from the agriculture department, the acreage sown with tobacco was 68,200 hectares in 2003-04, and rose to 92,900 hectares in 2013-14 and to 1.38 lakh hectares as of January 2023.

The figures show that till 2013-14, about 95% of tobacco was grown in the Charotar region — Anand, Kheda and Vadodara districts. However, in 2013-14, it started to be grown in North Gujarat, which now accounts for 30% of tobacco acreage, mainly in the districts of Mehsana, Banaskantha, Patan and Sabarkantha. In Central Gujarat, 96% of the area sown with tobacco is in Kheda and Anand districts.

Bhikhu Patel, president of the Gujarat Tobacco Merchant (Farmers) Association, says tobacco cultivation in Gujarat is rising because the crop never fails and doesn't need pesticides as tobacco itself is a natural pesticide. "As the population grows, consumption of cigarettes and other tobacco products is also rising. Tobacco is also used in the pharma and cosmetics industries," he said.

While Anand and Kheda dominated earlier, Banaskantha, Sabarkantha and Mehsana are fast catching up. The work of the Tobacco Research Institute in Kheda is also helping farmers.

An agriculture department officer said, “While tobacco sells for Rs 6,500 to Rs 7,500 a quintal, wheat sells for Rs 2,800 to Rs 4,000 a quintal.”

D H Rabari, Kheda district agriculture officer, said “Tobacco farming keeps wild and domestic animals away because of the bitter taste of the leaf. Damage to the crop from grazing animals is minimal compared to other crops. More farmers are opting for tobacco while rotating their crops.” He added that Vijapur in North Gujarat is fast turning into a trading hub for tobacco, despite the vast area under tobacco cultivation in the Charotar region.

M S Prajapati, Patan district agriculture officer, said, “Returns from tobacco are higher than other rabi crops. The greater availability of water in North Gujarat has led farmers to shift to tobacco. Earlier, canal bed irrigation was only available in Charotar. The crop grown here is used in the bidi, cigarette, pharma, and cosmetic industries and as an insecticide.