

A bid to bring 'romance back into farming'

Essel group ties up with Dutch varsity

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India's farm sector could soon glean insights of a 100-year old Dutch University that focuses on 'healthy food and living conditions', under a new corporate philanthropy initiative to boost farmer incomes and spur the rural economy.

The Sach Foundation, Essel group's philanthropic arm, has tied up with the Wageningen University and Research in the Netherlands, to ring in its expertise and help farmers in India deploy technology and best practices to boost yields and be an active part of the farm-to-fork value chain. A team from the University held meetings with farmers in U.P., Haryana, Andhra Pradesh and Rajasthan last month.

1,000-acre campus

"The Netherlands is a small country with 16 million people, but is the world's second largest food exporter. Till our rural economy is fixed, till a farmer's child doesn't have an interest in farming, till then, I don't see a future for our country. It's not just about farmers, the health problems and poverty faced by people also stem from the quality of food

they eat," said Essel group chairman Subhash Chandra.

As per the plan, the university will work with the foundation to first set up a 1,000-acre campus in Andhra Pradesh as a pilot project, creating greenhouses for fruits and vegetables, dairy farms, poultry farms and processing facilities for various crops. A few sites have already been identified in the State for the cluster.

Once the intervention has a demonstrable impact on farm output and incomes, similar clusters are planned in the northern, eastern and western parts of the country. "The habit of giving subsidies to our farmers and controlling the markets has weakened our agriculture sector. We have to bring the romance back into farming," Mr. Chandra said about the prime motivation for this initiative, on which around ₹300 crore is likely to be spent upfront.

"This will be run like a business with the profits reinvested into the project. Usually, firms just give some money as donations and think they are done with it, but we want a self-sustaining model to be implemented," said the Essel group chief.