

Grass that changed luck of thousands of farmers

DISTRICTS IN FOCUS

MOSTAFA SHABUI, Bogura

Twenty years ago, Abdul Gafur Sheikh was a poor day-labourer and debt-ridden and found it difficult to feed a family of six.

Later, a school teacher in Sultanpur Baraipara village under Gaibandha's Palashbari upazila advised him to go to the upazila livestock office.

Accordingly, he went to the office the next day.

The livestock officer gave him some seedlings of Napier grass and told him to cultivate it. When he asked what would happen if he grew it, the officer replied that it would change his fate.

He grew Napier grass in his five decimals of land. Since then, there was no looking back for Gafur.

Today, the 55-year-old owns eight bighas of land and lives in a semi brick-built house with his family.

He and his three sons cultivated the grass on 20 bighas of land and made a profit of more than Tk 24 lakh last year.

"Growing grass is less expensive than any other crops. You need not any pesticides. Napier consumes less water. Once you cultivate seedlings, it will give you crops for the next three years continually," he said earlier this week.

The grass cultivation has not only transformed Gafur's life, it has lifted thousands of others out of poverty in the northern district.

In Sultanpur Baraipara, Napier grass is everywhere, from a farmer's backyard to a piece of a fallen land. Whatever land the villagers own, they have brought them under grass cultivation.

Now, around 150 farmers in the village cultivate the grass on 200 acres of land and make a living.

Following Gafur's footsteps, thousands of farmers in adjacent Projapara, Digholkandi, Boro Shimul Tala, Kacharipara, Ashamotpur, Lokmanpur, Kishorgari, Kasiabari, Katuli, and Bengulia villages under the upazila are



MOSTAFA SHABUI

Abdul Gafur Sheikh of Palashbari upazila was the pioneer in Napier cultivation in Gaibandha district.

cultivating the grass as well.

In fact, farmers in 30 to 40 villages in the upazila are growing Napier grass.

Faruk Hasan, 28, a son of Gafur, said: "We have overcome poverty by cultivating grass. Now thousands of farmers of the area are following my father's footsteps and cultivating grass to eliminate poverty."

Once, there were not many job opportunities for the poor in the locality. Now people who went to work in garment factories in Dhaka and other industrial belts are coming back and profiting from grass cultivation.

Md Jahurul Islam, 42, a farmer of Sultanpur Baraipara, recalled tobacco was the main crop of the area a decade ago. Now grass has replaced tobacco cultivation.

Abdul Jalil, a farmer in Ashamotpur village, said: "There is no crop that has zero loss. Grass is the only crop that

incurs no loss."

"If you cultivate one bigha of land, you can earn Tk 20,000 to Tk 30,000 after a month. There is no risk."

If Napier grass is grown on one bigha of land, the expenses would be Tk 40,000 to Tk 50,000 per year. But the growers will make a profit of Tk 1 lakh to Tk 1.5 lakh in a year, farmers said.

"The grass grows so fast that you can harvest 10 times a year and will get 3,000 bundles of green grass per month from one bigha land," Gafur said.

Every bundle of grass is selling for Tk 8-10.

In 2005, Gafur started dairy farming as well. Last year, he sold 12 cows at Tk 1 lakh to Tk 2 lakh each.

Moinul Islam, a farmer in Projapara village, cultivated Napier on three bighas of land and earns Tk 20,000 per month.

He has four cows.

"Every household in this village rear cattle. We are earning money by cultivating grass and farming cattle."

"Napier cultivation changed our economic condition," said Zafar Ahmed, a farmer in Projapara.

"Around 10 years ago, many unemployed men in this area were stuck in acute poverty. The situation has changed now. Every farmer of the village has a van to carry grass to markets. Children are going to schools and colleges."

Farmers supply grass to the markets in Rangpur, Gaibandha, Joypurhat, and Bogura districts every day.

Last year, floods hit these districts four times, and there was an acute crisis of fodder. "The grass saved our animals," said farmer Suruj Mia.

READ MORE ON B3

Govt to import 50,000 tonnes of rice from India Also approves purchase of LNG from US

REJAUUL KARIM BYRON and DWAIPAYAN BARUA

The government yesterday approved the import of 50,000 tonnes of rice from India in order to increase the country's food stock and control spiralling prices.

The cabinet committee on government purchase approved the food department's proposal to import 50,000 tonnes of non-basmati boiled rice from M/s PK Agri Link Private Limited for about Tk 177 crore through an international tender.

The meeting was chaired by Finance Minister AHM Mustafa Kamal.

At a press briefing after the meeting, Cabinet Division Additional Secretary Shahida Akhter said that food ministry officials contacted India, Thailand and Myanmar to import rice.

They eventually decided to approve imports from the Indian firm since it was the lowest bidder.

The price of rice bought from PK Agri Link would be around \$ 430 per tonne, she added.

With the latest approval, the government has so far taken steps to import a total of 13 lakh tonnes of rice.

On March 10, the government approved three proposals to import a total of 3.5 lakh tonnes of rice from India, Thailand and Vietnam under state-to-state arrangements.



In the early weeks of this month, the government took the initiative to import 5.5 lakh tonnes of rice through an international open tender.

To expedite these imports, the economic affairs committee on March 3 approved a proposal for shortening the bidding process from 42 days to 10.

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NEWS In Brief

Intel to spend \$20b on new US chip plants

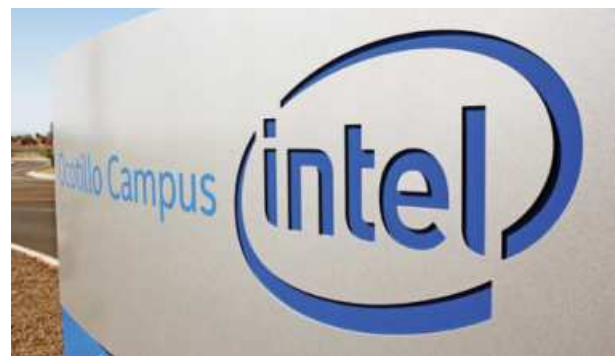
AFP, San Francisco

US chip titan Intel said Tuesday it will invest \$20 billion in building two new plants in Arizona as part of a plan to ramp up production in the United States and Europe.

The move comes as a global chip shortage has countries and companies in those regions looking to reduce reliance on plants in Asia for semiconductors, which are used in a growing array of products such as cars.

Intel chief executive Pat Gelsinger announced the investment during a webcast about the company's strategy, as it faces pressure to come up with bold ways to fend off fierce competition.

"Intel is the only company with the depth and breadth of software, silicon and platforms, packaging, and process with at-scale manufacturing customers can depend on for their next-generation innovations," Gelsinger said.



REUTERS/FILE

The logo for the Intel Corporation is seen outside the Fab 42 microprocessor manufacturing site in Arizona.

Asia markets fall again as virus fears hit confidence

AFP, Hong Kong

Asian markets extended their losses yesterday with virus and vaccine fears returning to haunt investors as Europe faces fresh infection spikes and lockdowns that could knock the economic recovery off course.

After several weeks of worrying that an expected resurgence in global growth will fan inflation and force central banks to hike interest rates, the fear of another Covid-19 wave has returned.

Europe's two biggest economies, Germany and France, as well as a number of other countries have been forced to impose new restrictions to battle the disease while struggling to get their vaccination programmes rolling properly.

"Covid-19 cases continue to resurge in continental Europe, so their double-dip recession persists as they continue to argue about vaccinations and why they are lagging behind the US and Britain in vaccination rates," said market strategist Louis Navellier.

Hong Kong was among the biggest losers, dropping two percent after news that the government had suspended its Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine programme over concerns about packaging, dealing a blow to the city's already slow inoculation programme. Hong Kong's Hang Seng Index has now fallen into a correction having lost more than 10 percent from its recent high.

GLOBAL BUSINESS

One-fifth of largest companies adopt net-zero emissions target

REUTERS

One in five of the world's 2,000 largest publicly listed companies have now committed to a "net-zero" emissions target to help tackle climate change, researchers said on Tuesday.

The companies, representing nearly \$14 trillion in sales, have promised to cut their planet-heating emissions to net zero by mid-century, meaning they will produce no more emissions than they can offset through measures such as planting trees.

The report by the UK-based Energy and Climate Intelligence Unit (ECIU) and Oxford Net Zero, said it was the first systematic global analysis of corporate and government commitments to reach "net zero" emissions.

The sector with the highest level of net-zero targets was household and personal products, where over two-thirds of the biggest companies by sales have such goals.

The report also found that countries representing 61 per cent of global emissions have announced net-zero targets.

The United Nations is encouraging the spread of net-zero commitments to give the world a chance of limiting warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius, in line with the Paris



With climate change ever a present danger in today's world, many of large-scale operations have adopted a "net-zero" emissions target.

REUTERS

Agreement, to avoid the worst impacts of climate change.

Richard Black, the report's lead author and senior associate at the ECIU, told

the Thomson Reuters Foundation that investors and consumers are piling pressure on companies to cut their emissions.

But the research revealed many net-

zero targets are yet to be backed up by transparent and robust steps needed to reach net zero, he added.

There are growing concerns that businesses could be announcing climate action but not following up with concrete changes - a practice known as "greenwashing".

"We've had a massive number of entities setting targets over the last few years, but of course a target on its own is not going to reduce emissions," Black said.

The report found that only 20 per cent of targets by governments and companies meet the basic criteria for credible net-zero plans set out by the UN-backed "Race to Zero" campaign.

They include defining interim measures and targets, starting to take action immediately and publishing progress reports.

Report co-author Thomas Hale, from the Blavatnik School of Government at the University of Oxford, warned that companies and countries cannot simply rely on buying carbon offsets to reach net zero.

"The most important priority is immediate emissions reductions," he said in a statement.

Banks provided \$4t to oil since climate deal: NGOs

AFP, Paris

The world's leading banks have provided the fossil fuel industry with \$3.8 trillion in financing in the five years following the signing of the Paris climate accord, a group of non-governmental organisations said on Tuesday.

While financing dropped last year as oil output plunged thanks to the coronavirus pandemic, the report found that it was still higher than in 2016, the year after the signing of the Paris Agreement where nations agreed to cut back CO2 emissions to limit the rise in global temperatures.

"The overall fossil fuel financing trend of the last five years is still heading definitively in the wrong direction," said the report by NGOs, including Rainforest Action Network, BankTrack, Oil Change International and Sierra Club.

The report called for "banks to establish policies that lock in the fossil fuel financing declines of 2020, lest they snap back to business-as-usual in 2021."



Oil pumpjacks are seen in Lagunillas, Venezuela.

REUTERS/FILE

"It found that US banks remained the top bankers to fossil fuel companies last year, followed by Citi and Bank of America. If their financing for the fossil fuel industry dropped, French banks, in particular BNP Paribas, actually increased their support. Italy's UniCredit earned top marks for policies to restrict financing for fossil fuels, although the report noted it earned only half the points possible.

It said the findings underscore "that the banking sector remains far from committing to a complete exit from fossil fuel financing".

The report also noted that many banks, like governments and companies, are making commitments reach net zero carbon emissions by 2050, but have yet to provide plans that don't rely upon lots of offsetting and rosy assumptions about technological advances. "No bank making a climate commitment for 2050 should be taken seriously unless it also acts on fossil fuels in 2021," the NGOs said.