

Drylands Must be Reimagined through Resilient Institutions, Digital Public Infrastructure and Community Action: Secretary, Department of Land Resources (DoLR)

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Secretary, Department of Land Resources (DoLR), Shri Narendra Bhooshan, emphasised the need to move from responding to droughts after they occur to building resilient dryland landscapes through integrated watershed development, technology and community participation, while speaking at the Dryland Congress 2026 Partner Spotlight at the National Agricultural Science Complex (NASC), New Delhi, on “*Reimagining Drylands: Institutions, Digital Public Infrastructure and Community Action for a Climate-Resilient Future.*”

The Dryland Congress 2026, being held in New Delhi from September 10, has emerged as an important international platform for deliberation on the future of dryland agriculture. The Congress has brought together more than 800 participants from over 25 countries, including scientists, policymakers, development partners, industry representatives, academicians, civil society organisations and farmers, to exchange knowledge and deliberate on science-, technology- and policy-based approaches for building resilient and sustainable dryland agricultural systems.

Shri Bhooshan said that “drylands are not wastelands”, but living and productive landscapes whose potential is constrained by climatic variability. Rainfed agriculture covers about 61.39 million hectares, or 43% of India’s net sown area, and contributes around 40% of the country’s food production.



Highlighting the importance of integrated landscape management, he said, “If we restore the landscape, we restore the water cycle; if we restore the water cycle, we restore livelihoods.” He noted that the watershed approach is particularly relevant to drylands as it integrates land, water, vegetation and livelihoods.



Shri Bhooshan highlighted the contribution of the Watershed Development Component of Pradhan Mantri Krishi Sinchayee Yojana (WDC-PMKSY), implemented by DoLR. Over the past 12 years, 7,602 watershed development projects covering about 34 million hectares have been implemented. These interventions have created or rejuvenated around 0.9 million water harvesting structures, provided protective irrigation to about 2 million hectares, benefited nearly 6 million farmers, generated 67 million person-days and covered 0.3 million hectares under plantation.

Shri Bhooshan said that watershed development should be viewed as an investment in natural capital, with completed projects demonstrating a Benefit-Cost Ratio of about 2:1 and significant improvements in groundwater, cultivated area, cropping intensity, milk production and farmers' incomes.

Emphasising technology, he said watershed development must move “from GIS to intelligence—from knowing where an asset exists to knowing whether the landscape is becoming more resilient.” The proposed Watershed Portal will provide an integrated Digital Public Infrastructure covering the lifecycle of watershed projects and incorporating key geospatial datasets.

He stressed that “digital tools can provide the evidence, institutions can provide the framework, and communities provide the ownership.”

Calling for stronger partnerships among governments, research institutions, development partners and communities, Shri Bhooshan said India has an opportunity to develop a scalable Indian Dryland Development Roadmap and demonstrate a global model of landscape restoration and rural prosperity, contributing to the vision of Viksit Bharat@2047.

He concluded that the watershed must become “much more than a project boundary”—a platform for restoring natural capital, securing water, strengthening agriculture, creating livelihoods and building climate resilience.

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