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EDITORIAL ANALYSIS

Before the Grain: How a Super El Nino Hits Fodder and Feeds Inflation

DOWN TO EARTH

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THE LIFT LINE

When policymakers brace for a drought year, they watch the price of rice and wheat. But the first casualty of a failed monsoon is usually not the grain on the plate, it is the grass in the field, and the milk, meat, and eggs that grass becomes. In a **super El Nino** year, the inflation shock may reach the household through the dairy pail long before it reaches through the ration bag.

WHY THIS EDITORIAL MATTERS FOR YOUR EXAM

This editorial matters because it forces an aspirant to connect three silos the syllabus usually keeps apart: the physics of the ocean and atmosphere, the economics of the livestock sector, and the mechanics of inflation. UPSC increasingly rewards candidates who can trace a causal chain across these boundaries rather than reciting each in isolation. A climate event that begins in the equatorial Pacific and ends in a household food budget is precisely the kind of integrated, real-world linkage examiners reach for when they want to separate rote learners from genuine analysts.

GS Paper 3: Climate impact on agriculture, food security, the livestock economy, and the drivers of inflation. For **Prelims**, hold the specifics: **El Nino** is the warm phase of the **El Nino-Southern Oscillation (ENSO)** in the equatorial Pacific and tends to suppress the Indian **southwest monsoon**; the **Indian Ocean Dipole (IOD)** is a separate but interacting driver that can offset or amplify ENSO effects; the **India Meteorological Department (IMD)** sits under the **Ministry of Earth Sciences**; India is the **world largest producer of milk**; food inflation is tracked through the **Consumer Food Price Index (CFPI)**; and the classic distinction is between **cost-push** inflation, driven by supply-side scarcity, and **demand-pull** inflation, driven by excess demand. For **Mains**, the argument to carry is that climate risk to agriculture is not only a grain story; fodder and livestock sit upstream in the food economy, and protecting them early can pre-empt an inflation spiral that grain buffers alone cannot stop.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

El Nino refers to the periodic warming of the central and eastern equatorial Pacific Ocean, one pole of the coupled ocean-atmosphere oscillation known as **ENSO**. Its influence on India is statistical rather than mechanical: not every El Nino year produces a drought, but El Nino years carry a markedly higher probability of a weak or erratic **southwest monsoon**. A "super" or strong El Nino simply denotes an event of unusual magnitude, which raises both the odds and the potential severity of monsoon suppression.

The monsoon does not fail uniformly. It can arrive late, withdraw early, or deliver its total in violent bursts separated by dry spells. For a grain crop that can be irrigated, this is manageable; for the vast rain-fed **grasslands, pastures, and coarse-fodder** systems that feed India livestock, there is no irrigation backstop. That asymmetry is the heart of this editorial.

THE CORE ARGUMENT / ISSUE

Fodder is the first domino, not grain

Grain markets are cushioned by public procurement, buffer stocks, and the option to import. Fodder markets have almost none of these shock absorbers. Green fodder cannot be stockpiled at national scale, dry fodder is bulky and costly to transport, and there is no minimum support price signalling farmers to hold reserves. So when the monsoon falters, pasture and coarse-fodder output falls almost immediately, and it falls in exactly the regions that keep the most animals.

From empty troughs to costlier milk

India runs the **world largest dairy herd** and is the **world largest milk producer**, so livestock is not a side sector but a pillar of both rural income and the food basket. When fodder grows scarce and dear, feed costs rise, animals yield less, distressed farmers sell stock, and the supply of milk, meat, and eggs tightens. Because these are protein-rich, high-frequency purchases, their prices show up fast and visibly in the **Consumer Food Price Index**.

A transmission channel policy tends to miss

STAGE	WHAT HAPPENS	WHY IT IS MISSED
Super El Nino	Higher odds of a weak monsoon	Treated as a forecast risk, not a fodder risk
Rain-fed pasture fails	Green and dry fodder collapse first	No MSP, no buffer stock, no import reflex
Livestock stress	Feed costs up, yields down, distress sales	Livestock sits outside grain-centric crisis plans
Food inflation	Milk, meat, eggs rise via CFPI	Read as a monetary problem, not a climate one

The table shows why the shock is so often diagnosed late: every institutional reflex is built around grain, so the fodder-to-livestock-to-inflation channel runs largely unwatched until prices are already climbing.

HOW TO THINK ABOUT THIS (ANALYTICAL FRAME)

Frame the resulting price rise as **cost-push, not demand-pull**, inflation. Nothing about a drought increases household appetite for milk; what changes is the cost of producing it. That distinction is decisive for policy, because the standard demand-side tool, raising interest rates, does nothing to grow more grass and can needlessly squeeze an economy whose inflation is coming from the sky, not from overheating demand.

The deeper analytical move is to see the livestock sector as an **inflation transmission belt** for climate risk. The monsoon is the shock, fodder is the first link, livestock is the amplifier, and the food price index is where the shock finally becomes visible to the public and the central bank. Read this way, **drought contingency planning** that ignores fodder is like flood planning that ignores the upstream reservoir: it addresses the symptom while leaving the source unmanaged. And because the **IOD** can either soften or sharpen an El Nino, the frame must stay probabilistic rather than deterministic.

THE DIAGRAM IN WORDS

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Super El Nino -> weak southwest monsoon -> rain-fed fodder fails first -> feed costs rise, milk yields fall -> livestock distress sales -> CFPI food inflation -> cost-push, not demand-pull -> grain-only response falls short
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WAY FORWARD

1. **Build fodder banks and reserves ahead of the shock.** Just as the state holds grain buffers, it should hold strategic dry-fodder and feed-block reserves in surplus years, positioned for rapid dispatch to deficit districts when the **IMD** signals a strong El Nino.
2. **Make fodder a named line in drought contingency plans.** District crisis plans should track pasture condition and fodder availability as core indicators, not afterthoughts, triggering transport subsidies and cattle-camp support the moment green-fodder shortfalls appear.
3. **Act on early monsoon and ENSO forecasts.** Use IMD and Ministry of Earth Sciences seasonal outlooks as a pre-positioning trigger, so that seed for quick-growing fodder crops and feed supplements reach farmers before, not after, the rains fail.
4. **Read inflation correctly and respond in kind.** Recognise a fodder-driven price rise as **cost-push** and answer it with supply-side measures, fodder logistics, targeted support, and if needed calibrated imports, rather than blunt monetary tightening that misdiagnoses the cause.

PYQ LINKAGE AND PRACTICE

UPSC has repeatedly examined the monsoon and its economic weight, the drivers of food inflation, and the meaning of El Nino, including Prelims items on ENSO and the IOD and Mains questions on the monsoon centrality to the Indian economy. The recurring theme of climate variability and agricultural risk, and the standing interest in the difference between supply-side and demand-side inflation, both make this fodder-to-inflation channel a natural extension of past questions.

Practice question: "In a super El Nino year, the risk to India food economy runs through fodder and livestock before it runs through grain." Examine this statement and suggest measures to pre-empt the resulting inflation shock. (15 marks, 250 words)

Sources: India Meteorological Department, Ministry of Earth Sciences, Down To Earth

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