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India has no plans to buy farmland abroad: Pawar

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The Indian government has no plans to buy farmland abroad or help private companies do so, agriculture minister Sharad Pawar said on Monday, after a local media report said New Delhi was debating the issue.

"There is no government proposal. The ministry has not taken up this proposal," Pawar told reporters.

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The Economic Times had in its Monday edition quoted the ministry's top civil servant, farm secretary P K Basu, saying it had sought views from other ministries on plans to help private companies buy farmland abroad. A few years ago, trade and government officials mooted the idea of buying or leasing farmland in Paraguay, Uruguay and Myanmar to grow oilseeds and lentils to tide over a shortage.

India is the world's top producer of many food staples but with a population of around 1.2 billion, it also has huge consumption. It is the largest importer of vegetable oils and pulses.

"Buying farm land overseas is not a simple issue. We have been talking about it for a long time," Atul Chaturvedi, chief executive of Adani Wilmar Ltd, the nation's biggest farm goods trader, told Reuters.

A consortium of vegetable oil companies was formed three years ago to talk to the governments of Paraguay, Uruguay, and Myanmar for buying large tracts of land for cultivating soyabean, sunflower and lentils.

B V Mehta, executive director of the Solvent Extractors' Association of India, said the consortium was still in negotiations to buy land in either Uruguay or Paraguay to develop soyabean plantations.

"The plan is to grow soyabeans in South America," Mehta said at a conference in Malaysia. "We are negotiating for a land lease in Uruguay or Paraguay. We need to decide on the details."

Only a few private vegetable oil companies have been buying land abroad to grow oil palm and seeds without any government involvement.

While the Indian government has failed to either buy or help private companies purchase large tracts of farmland abroad, state-run Chinese companies have been acquiring farmland overseas to meet rising demand when local farms are shrinking due to rapid industrialisation.

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