

# Double whammy: After rains, 'curfew' hits farmers

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NEW DELHI: The 21-day nationwide lockdown coincides with peak harvest season of Rabi (winter sown) crops in many parts of the country, triggering a demand for some regulated exemptions for farmers and farm labourers so that they don't lose their produce.

The crops of wheat, gram, mustard and lentils are ready for harvest in Punjab, Haryana, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and other parts in central India.

Even as states are trying to find out ways to allow harvesting, the lockdown created concerns on the ground due to unavailability of farm labourers in such a situation. In the backdrop of the crop loss due to recent unseasonal rains and hailstorms, farmers are not willing to keep the crops remain unharvested as they now want to retain whatever could be saved after extreme weather events this month.

Underlining this critical situation in the wake of lockdown, Lucknow-based farm expert Sudhir Panwar said, "Movement of farmers and agriculture labourers should be allowed from home to farms so that they can continue with their ongoing harvest operations. Delayed Procurement is not much of a problem, but harvest can't be delayed. If harvest is forced to be delayed, it will result into loss of 5-10% of produce due to 'shattering' in wheat and mustard."

Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh governments have, meanwhile, come out with certain advisories and exemptions to help farmers but it won't solve the problem of shortage of farm labourers during crucial harvest period. Though the procurement measures are being streamlined in many states, including Telangana, the most critical issue there is about harvesting the crops on time.

The Madhya Pradesh government allowed movement of wheat harvester while Uttar Pradesh government exempted movements of potatoes, carrots and sugarcane loaded vehicles. The Rajasthan government, meanwhile, issued guidelines on harvesting and threshing in the state, allowing farmers to continue with these operations during the lockdown period after taking certain precautions such as social distancing, use of sanitiser and regular hand washing.

"The farmers started harvesting early as they feared that another spell of rainfall will decimate the standing wheat crops. They will manage the harvest, if the governments give them clear guidelines and assist them with necessary movement of labour and machinery. If they restrict that movement, then harvesting will have problems," said Ramandeep Singh Mann, farm expert who has closely been tracking agricultural activities across north and northwest India.

Both Panwar and Mann are worried if matter is not resolved quickly across major agricultural states, it will severely affect the farmers and entire rural economy in due course.

Though Telangana government issued guidelines for decentralisation of procurement at village levels, there is no clarity on it in Punjab, Haryana, MP and UP where scale of procurement is much bigger. "Procuring from individual village would also need huge manpower, infrastructure, logistics and transport. It would be a long drawn process. A tectonic shift in procurement operation within 10-15 days, is unheard of," said Mann, engineer-turned-farmer.

Panwar suggested that the government should purchase those crops having minimum support price (MSP) directly from villages. "The closed schools can be converted into purchase centre," said Panwar while emphasising on the need to have government intervention at this critical juncture when farmers in many districts in north and northwest India have already lost

parts of their Rabi crops due to recent unseasonal rains and hailstorms.

Subhash Chaudhary, farmer of Jewar in Gautam Budh Nagar district, said the real issue at this juncture was completing the harvesting of wheat and mustard.

“If we wait for three weeks, the standing wheat crops will be dried up and most part of it would fall down (shattered), leaving quite less to be retrieved after threshing. Besides, the dried up crop residue would not be used as fodder, making it difficult for farmers to maintain their livestock,” said Chaudhary.

He noted that the lockdown, though of utmost necessity due to spread of coronavirus, created acute shortage of farm labourers and it would affect the harvest operation adversely even if government allows it under exemptions.

Officials in agriculture ministry, however, believed that the major harvesting and sale period for all Rabi crops will be after Vaishakhi (April 14) and therefore there was no need for farmers to have such panic at this stage.

“Most of the farmers have already harvested rainfed mustard. Potato can be harvested after lockdown period as many regions had recent rains,” said an official. He too, however, expressed his concerns over delayed harvesting of those crops if the lockdown period is extended beyond April 14.