

India's cotton production may be hit by rains, pink bollworm infestation

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Subramani Mancombu | November 17, 2020



Representative image

India's cotton crop output could be lower than initial estimates as it has been affected by rains and pest attack, according to various industry players across the country.

The Ministry of Agriculture in its first advance estimate of commercial crops for 2020-21 season (October-September) has pegged cotton production at 371.18 lakh bales (of 170 kg each).

Last week, trade body Cotton Association of India (CAI) estimated cotton production at 356 lakh bales but said that the crop had been affected by excess rains in some regions in the country besides infestation of pink bollworm.

“The weather is not favourable for cotton crop. The hot temperature during day time is not good for the standing crop,” said Atul Ganatra, CAI Chairman.

The crop has been affected in growing regions in North India, Telangana, Maharashtra and Gujarat. “Conditions for the crop in these areas are not good,” he said.

According to P Chengal Reddy, Chief Advisor to the Consortium of Indian Farmers Associations, at least one-third of the cotton crop in the known regions of Telangana has been affected.

“There are some unknown regions such as Guntur and Prakasam districts in Andhra Pradesh which have also been affected,” he said.

Telangana and Andhra Pradesh were badly affected by heavy rains under the influence of a cyclonic storm last month with parts of Hyderabad being inundated.

“We are yet to get a clear picture of the crop situation in Telangana and Andhra Pradesh. But we suspect that at least 10 percent of the cotton crop there could have been affected,” said Anand Poppat, a cotton agent at Rajkot, Gujarat.

Estimates have pegged Telangana’s cotton production at 48 lakh bales, while that of Andhra at 14 lakh bales.

Pink Bollworm infestation, a major concern

More worrying than the weather impact is the problems that have cropped up due to pink bollworms, an economically destructive pest in cotton causing losses up to 60 percent.

“Cotton production will be 5-10 percent lower due to pink bollworm infestation in Gujarat. In the Saurashtra region, the bollworm has affected plants in Bhavnagar, Amreli, and, to some extent, in Junagadh districts,” Poppat said.

“Even in Maharashtra, the crop in some parts has been affected. Still, I think we will achieve the 356 lakh bales as projected by CAI,” he said.

According to Anil Ghanwat, President of Shetkari Sangathna, the pink bollworm could affect 25-30 percent of the crop in Maharashtra. “Vidharbha region has been badly affected by the infestation. The worms feed on the plants,” he said.

The resistance against the pest attack has to come from within the plant for which it requires protein but the Union government has not given permission for the latest genetically-modified cotton variety, Ghanwat, whose organisation is demanding that the government allow farmers to grow the latest genetically-modified varieties.

“This would not have happened had our farmers access to the latest crop technology. Rains have first affected the crop and now this bollworm which will lead to problems in boll setting and dropping,” the Shetkari Sangathna leader said.

The Union government is yet to give its approval for the commercial cultivation of any genetically-modified crop ever since the Manmohan Singh-led United Progressive Alliance announced a moratorium on genetically-modified brinjal.

The current National Democratic Alliance government has left it to the respective States to permit the trials of genetically-modified crops.

The pink bollworm will force farmers to pluck out the plant from their farmers and go in for other alternatives such as chana (gram), wheat, jeera (cummin), said cotton agent Poppat.

“Two pickings have generally been completed. The third and fourth pickings in cotton crop could be affected. So, farmers would prefer to pull out the cotton plant and go for other alternatives that can also ensure better returns,” he said.

According to CAI, Maharashtra is estimated to produce 85 lakh bales and Gujarat 92 lakh bales this season.

CAI’s Ganatra said that the trade body would review the crop production at a meeting on December 10.

Industry not worried over cotton supplies

But industry users say that the crop being hit by the weather and pink bollworm should not be any cause for worry over supplies.

“We have a huge carryover stock and we need not worry over supplies even if the crop is affected. In fact, we will have a good carryover stock next season too,” a mill user said.

Cotton consumption was affected last season as industries were shut during the lockdown announced by the Government to tackle the spread of novel Coronavirus during March-June this year. It has resulted in a record carryover stock of 107.50 lakh bales this season.

Next season, too, the carryover has been pegged at 87.50 lakh bales, which is also higher than normal.

Reports of a lower crop have, however, helped kapas (raw cotton) prices of raw cotton to rise. Raw cotton in Gujarat primary agricultural markets is currently being quoted at Rs 5,340 a quintal against Rs 4,845 at the beginning of last week. This is still lower than the minimum support price of Rs 5,515 a quintal fixed by the Union government.

Processed cotton is quoted upwards of Rs 40,600 a candy (each 356 kg), while cotton December contracts on MCX quoted at Rs 20,170 a bale on November 17 afternoon against the previous close of Rs 20,220.

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