

Rare rains likely to suppress cotton output this year

LAHORE: Widespread unusual monsoon rains in cotton belt of Sindh and Punjab may dampen prospects of harvesting even average cotton produce this year beside inflicting losses to other crops, growers said on Friday.

Following over 100 millimeter rain recorded in past 24 hours in various coastal districts and nearly 40-70mm in parts of core cotton belt of Sindh, farmers sound alarm bells about possible adverse effect on output of kharif (summer) crops. There is prediction of rain spells in main cotton growing region located in southern Punjab in next couple of days. The current rainfall has been stated to occur in Balochistan during Friday to Sunday, posing threat to plants.

Rain and gusty winds are plummeting otherwise dry and parched but hard soils as monsoon low pressure from Bay of Bengal hovering over Sindh since Thursday night is going to collide with westerly moist wave. Under the influence of this rare weather system in this part of the country, strong monsoon currents are penetrating in Sindh, southern Punjab and eastern Balochistan. The handshake of easterly and westerly monsoon currents in lower and central parts are rare but whenever it happens it proves catastrophic in terms of negative impact of rains and gusty winds on standing crops. Heavy downpour may generate flash flooding in streams of Balochistan and Sulaiman range in South Punjab, ravaging crops and orchards in nearby fields.

During the past 36 hours, rain/wind-thundershowers occurred in Sindh, Balochistan and Punjab. Hot and very humid weather prevailed elsewhere in the country. Karachi received up to 94mm downpour Shaheed Benazirabad 47mm, Sakrand 35mm, Badin 36mm, Rohri 28mm, Hyderabad 27mm, Tando Jam 26mm, Sukkur 24mm, Padidan 21mm, Thatta 15 in Sindh while Rahim Yar Khan in Punjab received 20mm rain while 17mm rain was registered in Khuzdar, Balochistan.

"Moderate to intense rain for longer period could prove devastating for cotton crop," said Hassan Ali Chaniho, a former agriculture minister in Sindh. "Farmers should do everything to drain standing water in case of heavy rains and make arrangements to protect the plants from the harmful effects. The persistent waterlogging of soil may rot plant roots, suffocating the healthy plant in no time."

Chaniho, a grower himself who hails from Sanghar, the prime cotton producing district of Sindh, lamented that rain has been continuing in this district since late afternoon, which is too much for cotton crop sown in this otherwise dry part of the country.

"Moreover, shedding and lodging are other likely outcome of such hazardous weather for cotton flowers, bolls and even for whole plant," he said. "Raindrops falling into opened cotton bolls used to have negatively effect on lint colour, degrading its quality."

Rain is not a welcome thing even in short spells as it brings muggy weather which is ideal for infestation of pests, added.

Before rains, cotton crop was not in a very good shape despite greater area under cultivation this year. Pest attack is on the rise so does the prevalence of cotton leaf curl virus in patches.

"Rain would be a boon for most of other summer crops including sugarcane and rice," Chaniho said.

Khalid Khokhar, president of Pakistan Kissan Ittehad said there was rampant attack of whitefly and now greater humidity would invite pests in addition to physical damages to cotton plants.

"Farmers of cotton are already in demoralising mood due to non-favourable policies of the federal and provincial governments and now menace of unfavorable weather would likely to wreak havoc to cotton crop, which is a cash crop and main raw material for textile sector," said Khokhar. "Sowing of autumn maize may also be delayed by rain spell."

In a world of global warming, Khokhar said, heavy or prolonged rain triggered climatic factors such as temperature, wind, rainfall and humidity. "These abiotic stresses not only physically damaged plant but significantly affect the flower and boll production of cotton."

On the flip side, rain is very much beneficial for replenishing groundwater and water reservoirs like small dams, lakes and ponds. It will help significantly filling Hub dam in Balochistan and many other small and micro water storing infrastructure and tend to increase water level of aquifer.