

New Bt cotton hybrid to boost yield

NEW DELHI: The next growth area in Indian cotton farming may come from newer hybrids of Bt cotton, which allow farmers to plant more cotton in the same area.

Almost 95 per cent Indian cotton farmers already use the genetically modified Bt cotton.

When tested in the cotton belts of the Vidarbha and Marathwada regions, several next-generation Bt cotton hybrids, planted in high density in the fields, gave farmers 20 per cent hike in their income.

At least two private companies—Mahyco and Ankur Seeds—were involved in developing these hybrids, tested successfully on an experimental basis in Aurangabad, Jalna,

Beed, Jalgaon, Dhule, Yavatmal and Wardha.

“Development and deployment of high-density planting to maximise yield potential, popularising the system, and mechanisation of cotton picking and harvesting is the way forward for Bt cotton in India,” said Bhagirath Choudhary, director (India) of the International Service for the Acquisition of Agro-biotech Applications (ISAAA), a global lobby group that promotes genetically modified (GM) crops.

The maximum number of regular bushy cotton plants that can be planted in a hectare of land currently is 55,000.

In the high-density planting system (HDPS), scientists in-

tend to plant 1-2 lakh cotton plants in the same hectare of land.

The spacing between two plants could be as low as 20 cm, instead of 90 cm-1 m for conventional cotton.

These high-density plants are straighter and the bolls are closer to the main stem, allowing mechanical harvesting.

“The HDPS is now being conceived as an alternate production system having a potential for improving productivity and profitability, increasing efficiency, reducing input costs and minimising risks associated with India’s cotton production system,” said K R Kranthi, director of the Central Institute of Cotton Research, Nagpur.

In 2014, India cultivated 11.6 million hectares of Bt cotton, planted in almost 95 per cent of that area. More than 77 lakh farmers cultivate the GM crop, said the ISAAA in a report released last week.

While regulatory authorities approved three hybrids in 2001, more than 700 types of Bt cotton seeds are now available in the Indian market.

India has tripled its cotton production from 13 million bales to 40 million bales in the last 13 years, and is projected to overtake China to become to world’s biggest cotton-producer in the near future. Currently, both produce 25 per cent of the global market share.

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