

Desi cotton poised for a comeback in North

Bt variety unlikely to be hit by the trend; area under the fibre may remain at last year's level

VISHWANATH KULKARNI
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Desi cotton is set to stage a comeback in North India this year. Lured by relatively better returns, farmers seem to prefer planting the *desi* or native varieties for the current kharif sowing season. However, seed companies maintain that demand for Bt hybrids is intact.

Though the area under such native varieties may not see a significant jump, the fact that farmers prefer it due to its ability to withstand pests and drought is interesting. Besides, the *desi* cotton prices are about 20 per cent higher than the Bt cotton due to short supplies. The short staple and coarse *desi* variety cotton is mostly used as surgical cotton due to its better absorption ca-

capacity and also in making denim.

Sowing at brisk pace

"Sowing across Punjab, Haryana and Rajasthan is being done in a brisk manner. An interesting trend being observed is that farmers are keen on planting the *desi* varieties. This has triggered a demand for *desi* seeds, which we are unable to supply," said KR Kranthi, Director at the Nagpur-based Central Institute of Cotton Research (CICR).

The *desi* varieties such as CICR 1, CICR III and RG8, that are immune to diseases such as cotton leaf curl virus, a major menace in neighbouring Pakistan, have seen good demand. "This demand for *desi* varieties is seen coming back after almost five to



seven years," Kranthi said. Till 5-7 years ago, North India used to have about 60,000-80,000 hectares under the *desi* varieties. "This year, we could see that area coming back," Kranthi said.

In cotton growing tracts of North India in Punjab, Haryana and the Ganganagar region of Rajasthan, the fibre crop is planted in early May for better results. Currently, plantings are being

carried out at a brisk pace, as a delay in wheat harvest has somewhat reduced the window for sowing.

Bt varieties unfazed

"Though there appears to be some interest in *desi* varieties, the demand for Bt cotton hybrids is unlikely to be impacted," said Paresh Verma, Research Director at Bioseed, the seed busi-

Blooming Acreage		(in lakh ha)	
	2014	2013	
Punjab	4.5	4.46	
Haryana	6.39	5.36	
Rajasthan	4.54	3.93	
Total North India	15.43	13.75	

ness of DCM Shriram Ltd. Bioseed is the largest player in the hybrid cottonseed market in North India, accounting for about 40 per cent of the total market of 65 lakh packets in the region.

"In fact, we used to sell *desi* hybrids till about five to seven years ago," Verma said adding that Bioseed could possibly looking at re-introducing them if the market demands.

The genetically modified Bt cotton hybrids had seen a steady increase over the past decade and now accounts for over 96 per cent of the total cotton area,

which stood at a record 12.97 million hectares last year.

"The start for this year's kharif planting season in North India has been good," said M Ramasami, CEO of Attur, Salem-based Rasi Seeds Pvt Ltd, the second largest player in the cotton seed market in the region. Rasi has introduced a new hybrid for the Indian market and expects to better its sales this year.

Acreage unchanged

Ramasami said that the total area in North India was unlikely to change despite the low prices that the fibre fetched for farmers last year in the region as competitive crops such as guar (cluster bean) also had not fared well. Though rice also posed a challenge for cotton in Punjab, the declining water table and the poor returns that basmati fetched last year could prompt farmers to go for cotton.