

THE STATUS OF INDIA'S PULSE SEEDING



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While it is well recognized that the Indian pulse market has bottomed out and prices of most pulses are moving up, in some cases such as chickpeas, the market rates are yet to breach the minimum support price (MSP).

However, two factors are set to drive the market up. On the supply side, the progress of pulse planting during the ongoing 2019 kharif season has left much to be desired. The onset of the southwest monsoon was delayed and the progress so far has been behind, leaving a 16% deficiency in precipitation so far. This not only affects pulses but the planting of major kharif crops such as rice, coarse grains, and oilseeds, which are lagging behind last year's levels.

Major pulses for the kharif season (planted in June-July and harvested in September-October) are tur/arhar (pigeon pea), urad (black gram), and moong (green gram). The normal planted area for the kharif season is 11.5 million (M) hectares (28.4 M acres). As of July 17, pulse seeding was done on 6.2 M hectares (15.3 M acres), down from 7.4 M hectares (18.3 M acres) at the same time last year.

While weekly updates on planting progress will continue to flow in from the Ministry of Agriculture & Farmers' Welfare, the window for planting is closing rapidly. There is apprehension that the final planted acreage for kharif pulses may fall short of the five-year average of 11.5 M hectares (28.4 M acres).

For the upcoming harvest, the production target indicated by the government is 10.1 M tonnes. However, pulse-wise, a break down is not available. The actual harvest of last year's kharif planting was an estimated 8.5 M tonnes.

With the currently available information, one can reasonably assume that the actual harvest size in the ongoing season will most likely fall short of the production target. The

extent of decline can be estimated by mid-August when final acreage data may be available. Precipitation over next 4-6 weeks is crucial.

One major factor that has kept the domestic pulse market prices contained is the large inventory with the National Cooperative Marketing Federation (NAFED) State agency. It is estimated that NAFED still holds about 2.2 M tonnes of chickpeas and about 600,000 tonnes of pigeon peas. This inventory burden is expected to ease considerably during August, September, and October when the country celebrates a series of Hindu festivals. Food consumption rises during these months.

The combination of weather on the supply side and festival demand is expected to lift the sentiment in the domestic pulses market. By October, the market is likely to return to a state of balance. It is also going to be time for the policymakers to review the existing restrictions (quantitative and tariff) on pulse imports. It is necessary for domestic and global trade bodies to recognize the emerging scenario and start working with Indian policymakers with the aim to ease the import restrictions.

India has imposed quantitative restrictions on imports of tur/arhar (400,000 tonnes) and also urad and moong (150,000 tonnes each). Chickpeas and lentils are subject to import duties of 66% and 33%. Yellow peas are subject to a tariff of 50% and a quantity ceiling of 150,000 tonnes.

As a policy commentator, I have been arguing in favour of boosting India's domestic consumption of pulses by including the legumes under various welfare programs of the government. After all, it is well recognized that pulses are the most economical vegetable protein available and can contribute advancing India's nutrition security. The poor nutrition status of most Indians, especially in rural regions, is well known.

It is heartening that the Commission for Agricultural Costs and Prices, a government body of experts that recommends a MSP for various crops, has strongly recommended that pulses be utilized in government-funded welfare programs.

Boosting pulse consumption will advance the interests of consumers by providing protein and at the same time help growers improve the marketability of the crop and arrest a fall in prices. It is hoped that promotional agencies will take a cue from this lead. India is one country in the world with a huge potential for a quantum jump in pulse consumption.

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