

Stagnant Pulse Production to Tighten India's Domestic Availability

By G. Chandrashekhar

India is currently harvesting 2022/23 kharif season pulse crops comprising mainly of tur (pigeon pea), urad (black matpe), and mung (green gram). Some minor pulses are also planted on a modest scale. This season's pulses were planted on 13.37 million (M) hectares (ha), down 550,000 ha from last year's 13.92 M ha.

Specifically, planted area for pigeon pea is down 200,000 ha, black matpe area is down 130,000 ha, and mung is down 135,000 ha. Key growing states of Karnataka and Maharashtra received satisfactory rainfall.

As per Indian government's first advance estimate released on September 21, kharif season pulses production will total 8.4 million tonnes (MT), virtually unchanged from kharif production last year.

The accompanying table contains kharif 2022/23 pulses crop production target set by the government, production estimate and comparison with last year kharif.

2022/23 Kharif season Production Target, Production Estimate and 2021/22 Production

Pulse	Target 2022/23 (MT)	Production 2022/23 (MT)	Production 2021/22 (MT)
Pigeon pea	4.5	3.9	4.3
Black matpe	2.7	1.8	1.9
Mung	2.5	1.7	1.5
Others	0.8	1.0	0.7
Total	10.5	8.4	8.4

Source: Government of India, Ministry of Agriculture

It is clear, total kharif production is well below the target of 10.5 MT. Both pigeon pea and black matpe output is less than last year's. Mung shows a marginal increase; but is beset with quality issues.

In the absence of any growth in production, India will face tight availability of domestic kharif pulses in 2022/23.

It is a matter of concern that kharif season production volume has stagnated. Since 2018/19, production has become trapped in the narrow 8.0-8.6 MT range. There is nothing to suggest a decisive break in stagnant production anytime soon.

Importantly, land available for pulse cultivation is nearing a saturation point. I do not expect any marked expansion of planted area in the years ahead. There will be competition for acreage from crops like oilseeds and cotton. Lack of breakthrough in seed technology and weather aberrations continue to keep pulse yields rather low.

However, import will help bridge the supply shortfall. Import of pigeon pea and black matpe is allowed free until March 2023. Lentil (masur) import is also allowed duty-free (except United States origin) until March 2023.

India has signed a memorandum of understanding with Myanmar, Mozambique, and Malawi for import of minimum agreed quantities of specified pulses including pigeon pea and black matpe.

Public agency National Agricultural Cooperative Marketing Federation of India Ltd. (NAFED) is currently holding inventory of about 3 MT of pulses, mainly desi chickpea. For Indian policymakers fighting inflation, this inventory is a big relief. The stocks are being released gradually to augment availability, vacate warehousing space and reduce carrying costs.

Demand for chickpea flour, called besan, usually increases during three to four months preceding the crop harvest in March.

In the current season, I suspect there may be wide variations in the quality of market arrivals because of weather aberrations. While good quality pulses will fetch prices above the minimum support price (MSP), lots below the fair-average-quality (FAQ) will be sold at below MSP. It is likely the government may end up mopping this sub-FAQ material.

No significant change in trade and tariff policy is expected until December. Planting of rabi season pulse crops, mainly chickpea and lentil, and weather conditions for the next four months will have a bearing on future price trajectory.

Lentil import will continue until March 2023. The likely import volume is about 600,000 tonnes. Canada and Australia are expected to vie for the Indian market.

I am often asked about the possibility of chickpea import. The country is already holding sizeable quantity of public stock of desi chickpea while domestic market prices continue to rule below the MSP. There is no justification for the government to reduce customs duty on chickpea import or encourage import.

The prospect is bleak, but some quantities of chickpea from East Africa come to India duty-free as import from Least Developed Countries (LDCs) is allowed without restriction. The quantity is usually in the 50,000-70,000 tonne range.

For the upcoming rabi season, pulses production target has been set at an ambitious 19.0 MT. Specifically, the production target for desi chickpea is 13.5 MT. No specific target has been assigned for lentil (masur), but it could be 1.5 MT. India cultivates small quantities of urad and mung also in the rabi season.

Weather risks in the months ahead cannot be overlooked. Winter rains in January and February are crucial, but adverse weather beyond March with heavy rains and hailstorm can hurt crop prospects.

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