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Whitefly fear forces Punjab farmers to uproot cotton crop

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NEW DELHI: While farmers in parts of Punjab have started uprooting cotton crop fearing whitefly pest attack, officials from the State government and the Centre are touring the cotton-belt to monitor the situation.

The pest attack, which caused extensive damage to Bt cotton crop last year in Punjab and neighbouring Haryana, had been reported this year as well in a few villages of Malwa region, mainly Fazilka district of Punjab.

Farmers are worried that there could be increased infestation if the current hot and humid weather conditions continue to prevail for the next 15-20 days. An increase in jassid pest attack, which too sucks the crop like the whitefly, is worrying farmers in parts of Mansa and Bathinda

districts.

After facing farmers' wrath in the poll-bound State last year, the ruling Akali government and the Centre are taking no chances. The team of officials and experts touring the cotton belt for surveillance will hold a review meeting on August 3.

"We have been able to control the spread this season, as it is limited to 132 acres in a few villages... But the next 20 days or so are critical. If it rains it will be good for the crop. Whitefly pest grows and spreads in dry, hot and humid conditions," Jasbir Singh Bains, Director, Punjab Agriculture Department, told *The Hindu*. Mr. Bains is a part of the expert team.

Mr. Bains disagreed that farmers were uprooting cotton crop due to whitefly pest. "It's the late sown cotton crop that farmers have uprooted in

a few villages, to replace it with paddy to ensure better returns," he said.

Whitefly attack caused extensive damage to Bt cotton varieties last year in Punjab and Haryana, resulting in a drop of nearly 40 per cent in production. Bt cotton accounted for over 98 per cent of the total cotton sown last year in both the States. The remaining two per cent was the indigenous cotton varieties. This season too, Bt cotton accounts for over 93 per cent of the total cotton sown.

After the losses they suffered last year due to whitefly attack, farmers in both Punjab and Haryana have planted less cotton this year. In Punjab, the area has shrunk to 2.56 lakh hectares, against 4.50 lakh hectares last season. In Haryana, cotton has been sown in 5 lakh hectares this year, against 5.80 lakh hectares last year.

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