

Demand for domestic cotton seeds growing

FE
P-14

Nanda Kasabe

Pune, May 12: *Desi* cotton is likely to make a comeback this year. After the failure of Bt cotton across several states, farmers seem to prefer planting the native varieties for the upcoming kharif season, industry experts said.

The cotton acreage across the states is unlikely to change this kharif season in the absence of remunerative alternatives. Cotton was sown on 118.18 lakh hectares last year and it is likely to remain the same this year as well, said KR Kranthi, director, Central Institute of Cotton Research (CICR).

Significantly, domestic cotton seeds were in demand in the northern states and were sold out in a couple of days which means that farmers are looking for sustainable alternatives, Kranthi said. CICR has been permitted by the government to develop straight line varieties of Bt cotton that could bring down the seed cost of cotton sharply.

However, seed companies have said that demand for Bt hybrids is intact. According to MG Shembekar, vice-president, National Seeds Association of India, there is a demand for domestic cotton varieties in areas such as Dhule, Jalgaon and Aurangabad in Maharashtra but 90% of the farmers are



still going in for Bt cotton.

In 2015-16 crop year (July-June), there was a significant damage to cotton crop because of whitefly and pink bollworm pest attacks in states like Haryana, Punjab, Rajasthan, Gujarat and Andhra Pradesh.

CICR has been working with 11 agricultural universities in India to develop 21 varieties of Indian Bt cotton, which are slated to be taken to farmers by 2017," Kranthi said. Apart from the lower cost, domestic varieties can also be reused, he said, adding that it may take another five to six years to come to the current level of the use of Bt cotton.

Several seed companies have approached CICR and many others are learnt to be working on their own to bring non-hybrid Bt cotton seeds in the market in the next two-three years as non-

hybrid options are also a solution for the growing pink bollworm menace.

The sentiment not to go in for Bt cotton has been growing in several states, including Andhra Pradesh and Telangana where the chief ministers have come out openly against this variety of cotton. In Maharashtra farmer activist Kishore Tiwari has been speaking out against Bt cotton.

Since the government clarified the patent issue in August 2015, many private seed companies have approached CICR for producing the genetically modified straight (non-hybrid) BG-I cotton seeds. Compared to just 450 gram seeds of hybrid Bt cotton being used per acre, in case of high density plantation with straight varieties, the farmers will have to use 4 kg seeds per acre, Kranthi said.

@chand 13/5/16

W 1/c News paper Unit