

## Farmers go for a second Watermelon crop

Sales of watermelons are picking up with advancing summer. In Karachi's main fruit and vegetable market, dozens of large trucks carrying tons of watermelons are coming daily from interior of Sindh and Punjab. Supply from Gadap and Malir districts is also meeting a small portion of the fast-growing demand.

Prices of watermelons may rise further as weather turns hotter in coming months and as Ramadan begins towards the end of June. However, if monsoon rains are intense in July, depressing the Ramadan-related additional demand, then prices won't be that high.

Officials of the Ministry of National Food Security and Research say they don't compile statistics on watermelon as such as these are clubbed together with data on all varieties of melons.



Information gathered from provincial agriculture departments, however, indicates that output of watermelons has hovered around 400,000 tons in last five years, with little year-on-year variation.

Even if production this year remains a bit higher than this level, demand is so strong that prices are bound to escalate, according to fruit wholesalers.

Traditionally, watermelon is produced in Pakistan from April to June. But growers say that, weather conditions permitting, they can also be produced in July. "For last three years when the holy months of Ramadan have been falling in late summer, growers in Sindh have resorted to late sowing of seeds, got watermelons till mid-July and marketed them in Ramadan to fetch fatter profits," says a Gadap-based grower, who did the same last year.

According to him some big growers in Sindh and Punjab are now experimenting double-cultivation of watermelons this year. In cases where harvests are expected to be over by end of this month, growers are re-planting seeds to obtain the second crop of the fruit by the end of June. "More importantly a few are also experimenting with imported seeds."

## Farms being lost to housing projects

Khyber Pakhtunkhwa government establish new city projects near densely populated urban centers in the province which is a positive but may have environmental costs associated with it. New mega city projects, one each in close proximity to Peshawar and Swabi, are being opposed by farmers, as they fear thousands of acres of agricultural lands would be eaten up by the planned urban dwellings.

These projects are certainly a pressing need to cater to the rising housing requirements across the province in general and the central KP in particular, which also happens to be, food basket for the province.

According to the provincial housing department's estimates, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa needs 1.17 million houses whereas the demand for new houses is growing at a rate as high as 120,000 houses per annum.

In the case of the 'mega city project' near Peshawar, the government holds the position that the 14,000 acres, between Peshawar and Nowshera that would be acquired for the new city are barren/uncultivable.

The construction of thousands of new houses would also generate investment, economic activities, creating jobs, self employment.

As the farmers' agitation is unlikely to subside, the provincial government may have to engage with the local communities who fear losing land to the housing projects.

Such studies are conducted for constructing medium-to-large water reservoirs and highways.

At present every major development

project requires to have EIA conducted before being launched.

Currently, the province has been experiencing a mushroom growth of private housing societies requiring effective rules to check environmental deterioration.

New housing societies have resulted into unabated loss of agriculture land in Peshawar, Nowshera, Mardan, Swabi, Swat, and Charsadda.

It is time to revisit the under execution projects and the future housing schemes (public and private) after conducting the strategic environmental assessment at the provincial government level.

## Food prices show mixed trend

Wheat prices have come down in the wholesale market on arrival of new crop in parts of Punjab and petering out smuggling to neighboring Afghanistan, but rates of wheat flour stay stubbornly high because wheat flour prices remain intact is that flour millers are still using costly wheat purchased earlier and most of them haven't got full quota of officially-subsidized wheat from Sindh food department.

Whereas in Punjab actual supply of new wheat grains have begun, right now in Sindh the old wheat is of low quality that hoarders are now offloading in the market. The milling ratio or the percentage of flour obtained out of this cheaper wheat, because of high moisture content, our cost of production is going down.

Latest estimates of wheat fields put this year's output at 24.21 million tons up from initial earlier estimates of 23.84 million tons.

On the other hand prices of both Basmati and non-Basmati rice varieties increased during March. Rice dealers say whereas demand for Basmati was up on higher domestic use, coarse rice consumption was growing both in local and foreign markets.

In fact, Basmati exports have declined by 9% (to 366,000 tons) between July and February 2014, but prices continue to firm up as food companies producing packaged rice brands have been making

large purchases. Coarse rice exports, on the other hand, increased 4.6 % to around 1.82 million tons in July-February 2013-14.

Unlike last year rice stocks are now quite large and prices shouldn't normally rise despite some growth in exports. According to initial estimates, rice output this year has reached close to 7 million tons, up from around 6 million tons last year.

Also sugar prices fell in March as supplies from mills increased and there was no immediate word on how soon the government would allow additional exports.

Wholesalers said sugar prices were hovering around Rs4600-4700 per 100kg, down from Rs4700-Rs4800 per 100kg a month earlier when millers were expecting rise of export quotas. In retail market, the price of the sweetener declined by one rupee per kg. This year, Pakistan's sugar production has risen past 5million tons, up from 4.8 million tons last year.

## India threatens WTO action over EU Mango ban

NEW DELHI: India on Friday threatened to drag the European Union to the World Trade Organization over its ban on mango imports.

Commerce Minister Anand Sharma warned the EU's decision to slap the ban on import of the highly prized Alphonso mangoes, known as the "king of fruits", could have "very negative fallout" on trade ties.

Sharma said he had written to EU Trade Commissioner Karel De Gucht urging him to overturn the "arbitrary" import ban on mangoes as well as four vegetables from India including bitter gourd and eggplant.

He urged the 28-nation EU not to



"precipitate the situation any further, which would lead us to go to the WTO.

The Geneva-based WTO deals with trade disputes.

In March, the EU plant health care committee said it would impose the ban after finding pests in 207 Indian consignments of fruits and vegetables.

The EU said it was acting to tackle what it called "significant shortcomings" in India's certification system.

It noted that a high number of Indian consignments contained "pests, mainly insects, like non-European fruit flies".

India, the world's largest mango exporter, sells up to 70,000 tons of the fruit globally.

The ban, which came into effect Thursday, has led to a mango surplus in Indian markets, driving down prices to fruit lovers' delight.

However, dismayed agricultural officials have warned of a "supply glut" and the effect of the fall in prices on poor farmers.

The mango ban further sours faltering India-EU free trade talks which began in 2007.

The negotiations have been beset by differences over intellectual property rights and other issues.

## Legal hurdles in GI for Basmati

None of the single GI has been registered under the prevailing legal mode in spite of scores of products in Pakistan qualifying for the status of a geographical indication. Instead, a trade mark status, not recognized abroad, has been granted to a commodity.

Major reasons for this situation are clumsy legal procedures, delays in fixing hearings, conflict of interest among the stakeholders whose number keeps rising and, above all, flawed definitions of territory from where the product has originated. As a result, the litigations remain unresolved for years.

In Pakistan, the trade mark status of basmati rice was granted to Basmati Growers Association in 2008 but was challenged in a court and remains undecided.



Other products that can qualify for the GI status include Apricot, Peshawari Chappal, Multani Halva, Hala ki Ajrak, Sargodha's Kinoo, Kasuri Mehti Sindhri Mango, Dir ke Chakoo (knives), wild mushrooms of Swat and Neeli Ravi Buffalo etc.

The basmati rice, one of the most sought-after commodities across the world happens to be a contentious issue within both Pakistan and India and also between them for it commands a lucrative market. It has been grown for centuries on a large tract in Punjab on both sides of the border and some adjoining areas. Now countries such as Bangladesh and the Philippines are also seeking GI status for the basmati produced in their lands.

The latest development in the ongoing basmati warfare is the Indian GI registry's decision on December 31, 2013 allowing Madhya Pradesh to be included among the basmati-producing states in India as mentioned in the original application now being processed. This caused anger among the parties concerned in both the countries.

Agricultural and Processed Food Products Export Development Authority (APEDA) which had filed the original application five years ago. In 2008 it was authorized by the Indian Parliament to act as owner for the registration of basmati rice till the registry accords GI status to it.

Pakistan adopted the composite model under which GI legislation has been incorporated in the Trade Marks Ordinance 2001 and the Trade Marks Registry is responsible for handling registration of GIs. The GI related workload, it said, is too small to justify a separate GI registry under the stand-alone model. But it is high time that the GI-awarding mechanism is rectified and updated to earn approval of the EU for the basmati.

### New food safety law

The provincial Food Safety Authority Act 2014 has placed comprehensive regulations and provides for strict punishments to improve the quality of food sold and consumed in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

Severe punishments provided by the Act which were passed by the provincial assembly in March this year, and is expected by officials to serve as a deterrent to food providers and sellers.

The provincial government has put a minimum penalty of Rs3m for every human life lost as a result of eating 'unsafe' food. The compensation money to be paid to the victim's family or his/her legal heirs would come from the food operator or the firm responsible for providing the 'unsafe' food.

The law is quite comprehensive in its scope. It defines firms/ food operators as those entities which produce, sell, transport, store, sell, distribute, import or export food.

Similarly, food businesses, defined under the law as 'any undertaking, whether for profit or not, carrying out any of the activities related to any stage of manufacturing, processing, packaging, storage, transportation, distribution, import, catering services, food services, sale of food or food ingredients', would also be liable to be regulated by the high powered food safety authority.

### Potato import may cost over \$60

Potato has yet to become cheap in the local market in spite of imposing 25 % regulatory duty on exports and making import s zero.

The government issued two statutory regulatory orders (SROs) on May 2 to fix regulatory duty on potato exports at 25%. On the same day, another SRO was issued stating that no regulatory duty and other levies would be charged on import of 200,000 tons of potatoes from May 5 to July 31.

The government has claimed that the country had surplus stocks of 1.1 million tons of potatoes lying in the cold storage. But retailers and wholesalers said that



more than 500,000 tons of potato had already found way to Afghanistan and Iran through informal channels, thus rising prices in local markets.

Importers and traders would also examine Chinese import option where new crop would arrive in the next 10 to 15 days and shipments take 18 to 22 days to reach Pakistan. Imports from India arrive in Pakistan in five to seven days while transit time from Bangladesh is 16 to 18 days.

Communication with the exporters of India, Bangladesh and China was under way to see the possibility of imports from these countries.

### Surge in Strawberry production in sindh

The production of Strawberry has increased from 76 hectares in 2009-10, the area under strawberry has significantly increased to 236.437 hectares in 2013-14 surged in upper Sindh's katcha area. The reason behind this the favorable climatic condition and soil of this region.

According to a researcher, the plant needs sunlight and cold night between October when it's sowing starts and January when crop is ready for marketing. It is mainly being grown in Khairpur and Sukkur though some cultivation was done in barrage areas but with lower yields.

From 270 metric tons, according to Sindh agriculture department, strawberry's production is estimated to go up to 1,752 metric tons this season. The fruit's marketing is continuing in April.



It is easily sold in the markets of Sukkur, Karachi and Hyderabad. The farmers get payments in advance at the time of sowing from buyers who are keen to ensure uninterrupted supplies.

The soil which has capacity of holding water in upper surface, helps salts leach down, favorable for its production.

Strawberry plant is sown on ridges in a way that it faces sunlight and needs back-to-back supplies of water. Safely, 40,000 to 50,000 plants are shown on an acre. The plants need water every third day for 26 to 30 days after sowing. Then onwards every week (after a fortnight) and subsequently, it needs to be watered after every 15 days.

According to Sindh Director General Research Dr Atta Soomro adequate post-harvest technology is needed for increasing the shelf life of the fruit as it is to be marketed immediately. Secondly, cold chain is very important. He doesn't rule out its cultivation in barrage areas saying pH factor could be tackled with proper treatment of land.

In addition to sunflower, strawberry has gradually become a good commercial option for farmers at least in upper Sindh region.

### Threat to fruit exports

If the government falters in its responsibility to ensure health standards of fruits and vegetable exports to EU Pakistan may lose a huge potential market that is reckoned up to be of a billion dollar.

Last month European Union banned import of mangoes and vegetables from India due to concerns over the presence of pests and insects in consignments. Brussels endorsed the ban suggested by the EU Standing Committee on Plant Health on import of mango, bitter gourd, eggplant, etc from India citing 'significant shortcomings in the phytosanitary certification system'.

According to reports in Indian papers, pests were found in 207 consignments of fruits and vegetables in 2013. The revision of the EU decision is expected in December 2015.

On the question regarding the

prospects of Pakistan benefiting from the exit of India from EU fruit vegetable market traders and exporters in Pakistan seem to be nervous about a possible ban on their exports, to explore the possibility of capturing the market space vacated by India.

The hierarchy in the ministry of commerce was hopeful that Pakistan will handle the situation with the cooperation of traders and contacts in SANCO office in Brussels. SANCO is entrusted with the responsibility to protect public and animal health and ensure that food is safe from farm to fork throughout Europe.

Pakistan is said to have developed systems and facilities in Multan, Lahore and Karachi for treatment and certification of perishables for export.

Pakistan exported 150,000 MT of mangoes in 2013 that fetched \$60 million from Europe which is about 16pc of total market of the fruit in Europe, according to an exporter.

According to Waheed Ahmed, former chairman, Pakistan Fruit and Vegetable Association and a leading commercial exporter of perishables, "The crop is so far very good and we hope to increase exports this year".

He also said, "The fruit export business has evolved in the country to match developed market standards. Gone are the days when we used to deal at fruit mandies (markets) in cities. Today most commercial exporters buy directly from farms and invest in the treatment and packaging, get required certifications before loading their consignments".

He told that Pakistani farm produce fetch half the price of other competing countries of the region for a number of reasons. He believed the ban will not hurt India much because their presence was negligible in fruit market. "As far as I know they exported no more than 2,000 consignments of mango to Europe last year. They specialize in value added mango pulp where they enjoy the lion share of about 80%."

Alarmed by the ban on India, exporter associations have asked the government to allow EU protocol-compliant exporters. The exporters must document

the information on pesticide spray, hygiene, inspections by Plant protection department, grading and follow code on post harvest intervals.

### Tunnel farming on the rise

The growth in tunnel farming in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa has started paying dividends as demonstrated by the off season tomato currently bringing windfall for its growers.

Farmers started applying high and low tunnel farming techniques a few years ago in the central and southern parts of the province, venturing into the uncharted territory of off-season vegetable production.



Similarly, the change recorded in the potato production trends also reflects gains for the progressive small farmers

Off-season vegetable production has been on the rise after some of the more progressive horticulturists from Nowshera, Peshawar, Swabi, and Mardan districts opted successfully for off-season tomato and cucumber.

Tunnel farming is seen as the way forward as it provides an answer to depleting farming area and increasing demand for vegetables due to population growth, according to Fazale Mabood, director at the KPK Directorate of Agriculture Extension.

According to Khalid Khan, a farmer from district Swabi, a vegetable grower in his area made significant profit from off-season tomato last year.

According to him he got a produce of 2500 kilogram tomato from an area of just 13 kanals.

The grower sold the crop at Rs400 per 40 kilogram, which, according to Mr Khan, was better than the tobacco crop income last year.

Similarly, horticulturists in the southern parts of the province, including Karak, Bannu, Dera Ismail Khan, Tank, and Lakki Marwat, where vegetable production has not been a popular idea, cultivators have started embracing tunnel farming.

Tunnel farming may turn around cropping patterns in Swabi district. Small tobacco growers would like to switch over to off season vegetables if they are provided financial support by the government.

### Wheat prices rise despite bumper crop in punjab

The wheat procurement drive in Punjab has many inconsistencies this year. The crop is bumper, but the government is resorting to 'extreme' administrative measures to complete even small target of 3.5 million tons.

Despite the crop size, the rate in open market has not dropped unlike the official expectations; it is, in fact, rising for the last few days.

Since new buyers have entered the game, farmers are unaware of how much crop are held back and who is buying how much. Even the number of buyers is a matter of debate because they have exceeded the traditional figure of market players, creating new trends in the market.

To begin with, everyone agrees that crop size is substantially a record one. The Agriculture Department officials agree that this figure might soon see upwards revision as increased harvesting and thrashing has taken place. Privately, they talk about 19.50m tons. The Food Department, however, put it even higher. It thinks that actual figure might cross 20m tons, because its field reports suggest at least 20% addition in the last year yield. Since its spread and exposure far exceeds the Agriculture Department, it may be closer to reality. ♦

