

## Wet March throws cold water on rabi crop

AMIDST CORONAVIRUS concerns, heavy rainfall, accompanied by strong winds and even hailstorms, across northern and eastern India is keeping farmers on the edge, just when they are set to harvest a bumper rabi crop. The thundershowers —



triggered by back-to-back Western Disturbances since end-February, with each spell lasting for 3-4 days and a fresh active one expected from March 21 — aren't good for the wheat, mustard, chana (chickpea), masur (red lentil), matar (field pea), potato and rabi maize that are in grain-filling or ripening stages. "The problem is not with rain as much as the winds and hailstones causing lodging (falling) of the crop and injury to the grain," said Rajbir Yadav, wheat breeder and principal scientist at the Indian Agricultural Research Institute (IARI) in New Delhi. The wheat sown in Punjab and Haryana before mid-November is now at the start of the "dough" stage, when the grain accumulates starch matter till it is ready for harvesting by mid-April. "If the fields remain water-logged for 3-4 days, the crop can even go dry because of the roots not getting sufficient oxygen," Yadav said. According to Pritam Singh Hanjra, a progressive farmer from Urlana Khurd village in Madlauda tehsil of Haryana's Panipat district, "large-scale lodging of wheat has taken place in my area and also Jind, Karnal, Kaithal, Kurukshetra, Yamunanagar and Ambala due to rains from March 11 to 14". There are similar reports of major crop lodging in Punjab's Patiala and Ludhiana districts from the latest thundershowers, and in Sangrur and Ferozpur from an earlier spell on March 6-7. Conservative estimates are that at least 10 per cent of the total wheat area in the state has suffered lodging. "The actual extent of loss will be known after we do a special girdawari (survey). The grain yields of the flattened crop will obviously get affected, as it cannot fetch nutrients from the soil," Sutantra Kumar Airy, director of Punjab's agriculture department, told The Indian Express. IARI's Yadav was, however, more optimistic about the wheat that is sown relatively late in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar from December. This crop is currently at the "heading" stage, with the earheads (containing the wheat flowers) emerging fully from the tillers (side stems) and just about to commence early kernel ("milk") formation. "In much of eastern India, sowing is generally late. Although it has rained quite heavily in these parts, the damage may not be much. These rains will, in fact, help keep the

temperatures down and allow for a longer period for grain-filling. I only hope we have no more thundershowers,” he said. Since end-February, there have been at least three Western Disturbances — storms originating in the Mediterranean region that, along with their induced low pressure area systems, bring winter/spring rains in India. “We had the first disturbance during February 28 to March 1, the second in March 4-7 and the third in March 11-14. And we expect a fresh and active one from March 21,” said G P Sharma, president (meteorology), at the private forecaster Skymet Weather Services Ltd. While wheat faces the highest risk, the damage to mustard is seen to be less, partly due to the main growing state – Rajasthan – not getting too much rain in the latest spell. “80 per cent of the crop in the main belt of Bharatpur, Alwar, Karauli, Dausa, Sawai Madhopur, Tonk, Jaipur and Kota is already harvested. Harvesting is 50 per cent over in the Bhind, Morena, Gwalior, Sheopur and Shivpuri areas of Madhya Pradesh as well. There has not been any heavy rain or hailstorms here,” said Pramod Kumar Rai, head of the Directorate of Rapeseed-Mustard Research at Bharatpur. Rainfall close to harvesting can result in the filled mustard pods cracking and the seeds being thrown out. But that stage has passed. The rabi maize crop in Bihar’s Kosi-Seemanchal belt, too, is said to be in overall good condition, despite quite heavy showers in the past few days. “We are still about 45 days from harvesting. The crop is still in the early-milking/soft dough stage and there is no danger so long as we have no storms or hail,” said an official from a corn seed company. The situation may be less rosy, although, for rabi pulses grown in UP (particularly Bundelkhand) and eastern Madhya Pradesh, which have also received excess precipitation so far this month. The same goes for potato. “Potato harvesting normally starts from February 25 and ends by March 25. This time, only 40-45 per cent of the crop in Aligarh, Hathras, Mathura, Agra and Firozabad has been harvested so far because of continuous rainfall. Waterlogged conditions could lead to the tuber rotting,” said Doongar Singh Chaudhary, a cold store owner at Khandauli, near Agra.

Source: [Indian express, March 16, 2020 \(verbatim reproduced\)](#)