

Farmers' agony continued in 2003

column this year, endorsing the fears that the production would not cross 8.5 million bales, showing shortfall of 2 million bales against the target while at least 3.5 million bales against the domestic requirement. This happened owing to the fact that the cotton crop had been badly affected due to bad weather and shortage of insecticides, damaging crop beyond all expectations.

The shortfall of the cotton production will badly affect the exports, which will have subsequent bad impacts on the economy of the country. In these circumstances, the vision of producing 15 million cotton bales by 2010 to meet the growing demand of the local textile industry will remain a distant reality, if government failed to take appropriate steps.

Wheat production also reduced to 18.5 million ton against the target of 19.5 million ton. The reduction in the production was followed later in the year by unprecedented hike in the price of wheat and its flour in the market. Subsequently, the government had to decide import of the grain to overcome crisis-like situation.

However, a sigh of relief for farmers was increase in wheat support price from Rs 300 to Rs 350 per maund later in the end of the year. This is the first time that the support price of wheat has been enhanced in the last four years. As per experts, the step would encourage the farmers to adopt judicious use of inputs and bring more area under cultivation to increase productivity of wheat.

The Cereal Management Committee of the European Union (EU) had passed a regulation through voting, deciding that the Pakistani Super Basmati would not be eligible for abatement concession of Euro 250 per ton with effect from January 1, 2004. This development will adversely affect the basmati growers as well as the exporters. Farmers' organisations blamed the government officials for not taking up Pakistan's case vigor-

ously. It is a pity that we, being the pioneer producer of fine varieties, failed in proving the origin of basmati variety.

Unprecedented shortage of potato and now onions sparked the price-hike all over the country. Tomato had been sold at Rs 120 per kg.

Various diseases and pest attacks continued to haunt farmers during the year. The reemergence of deadly cotton leaf curl virus has become a looming threat for the production of silver fibre. According to scientists, the DNA of new strains has different pattern if compared with lethal Cotton CLCV. American bollworm also remains a constant threat to cotton crop. Quick decline disease seriously affected mango trees in southern Punjab especially Rahim Yar Khan and Multan and there is no remedy of the disease.

The challenges posed by the World Trade Organisation (WTO) are yet to be dealt with. Pakistan needs to decrease the cost of production of its agricultural produce through the latest agricultural technology. Besides increasing the agricultural productivity, the quality of agricultural produce should also be increased to compete in international markets.

It is need of hour to develop comprehensive strategy to revitalise the agricultural sector, making it more competitive and ensure sustainable growth in the agricultural sector.

The rules of WTO demand high quality standards, competitive production costs and strong marketing efforts to attract the buyers from international market. We should also not ignore health conscious consumers in the global market, who prefer use of organic fruits and vegetable over the non-organic produce. Indeed a lot of work is to be done on this front with a view to enabling local farmers to remain competitive in the post-WTO era.

Rehabilitation and expansion of irrigation system could not be underestimated as about 90

per cent of wheat and almost 100 per cent of cotton sugarcane and rice in the country come from irrigated areas. However, the aging irrigation system is facing severe problems such as poor operation and maintenance, low recovery of revenues, technical and managerial inadequacies, water logging and salinity, posing a threat to the country's economy.

In order to address such problems, the government decided to carry out Water Management Programme at a cost of Rs 42 billion for improvement of irrigation water channels to enhance agriculture productivity. A special committee in this regard has been set up to evolve a comprehensive strategy to increase agriculture production in the country. The committee will design a National Water Management Programme to line 86,000 water courses during the next four years so as to reduce water wastage.

In Punjab and other parts of the country, it is for the first time in the history of the country that every grain of wheat offered by farmers was purchased at the support price fixed for the crop.

In Punjab, the production of rice during 2002-03 was greater by 2.5 per cent than 2001-02 and production has also registered increase up to 13.8 per cent. During 2003-04, rice was sown on 4.1 million acres from which 2.8 million metric ton production is projected as against the target of 2.4 million metric tons. Not only the crop has been a great success but also rice growers are getting remunerative prices of their produce this year.

The Punjab government is concentrating on lining of water courses and levelling of uneven fields. Under the directive of chief minister, 10,000 water courses will be brick-lined during the next four years. Out of these, 1,000 water courses will be lined during the first year and remaining 9,000 will be improved over the next

three years. Reduction of mark-up on agriculture loan was a major step taken by Punjab government besides increasing the slab up to 12.5 acres for Agriculture Income Tax. The government also introduced flat rate of abiana, which received mixed reaction of farming community. However a major part of them hailed the new system.

A new ministry of Agriculture Marketing was established by the Punjab government for taking steps to strengthen the marketing system of agricultural produces which could help recover 30-40 per cent post harvest losses of the growers. Up to 40 per cent horticulture produce is wasted due to less developed post harvest technology and infrastructure. Under the proposed marketing system, these losses will be reduced. Grading, packing, cold storage and cool chain facilities will be developed and it will ultimately help in increasing horticulture exports.

Punjab government had decided to distribute 150,000 acres of land among the landless tillers in the province to help them sustain their own livelihood. 12.5 acres of land will be given away to each of the tillers.

The land owners will not be allowed to sell the land for at least 10 years and for the first three years, they will be provided free-of-cost agricultural inputs like water, pesticides, seed and fertilizers. Punjab government had allocated Rs 400 million for research and development in the field of livestock.

The government also gave subsidy on electricity used for agriculture tubewells. The step was largely welcomed by the farming community. Meanwhile, Governor Punjab Khalid Maqbool had amended the Punjab Agricultural Pests Ordinance 1959, disallowing sowing of cotton crop before April 15 and paddy nursery before May 20 every year. Rice growers have to plough the land and collect and destroy all stumblers by burning sprouts, plants or parts of plants remaining above ground of rice before December 31 of the same year in which rice is cultivated.