

IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON AGRICULTURE



REPORT FROM KASHMIR

Kashmir

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Unlike other parts of the country Kashmir is experiencing an extended lock-down , it started after Central Governments decision regarding abrogation on Article 370 on August 5,2019 and has continued since. The sowing season in Kashmir usually starts in the month of April and the harvest takes place in September. In the month of April, farmers prepare the fields before sowing the seeds. The preparation involves, especially for rice sowing, the ploughing of land, removing of weeds, and pumping of water into the soil. As farmers of Kashmir have been living with a lockdown for a long time now, regular farm activities are not impacted much due to renewed lockdown restrictions though there have been cases of disruptions of supply of inputs such as seeds, fertilizers, pesticides, etc. The lockdown imposed in 2019 also brought with it exodus of labour that migrated from the other states.



Apple is central to Kashmir's economy. Mostly produced in regions of Baramulla, Shopian, Kulgam and Anantnag it is estimated that apple economy employs 3.5 million people. This year while apple blooms are sprouting and farmers are spraying fertilizers and pesticides in their orchards the worry about the prices they will realize for their produce once it is harvested later in the year.



Farmers and traders also worry about the apples that were stored last year due to price uncertainties arising from interruptions in supply chains due to lockdown. Last year it is estimated that around 1.5 lakh metric ton of apples was stored in cold storage units in Kashmir out of which apples estimated to be around Rs 900 Crores still are in cold storages. Ideally it is said that fruit should not be stored for more than seven months and as the clock ticks the farmers are finding it difficult to arrange transportation to the markets. The demand constraints in markets such as azadpur mandi where each vendor is allowed to buy just one truck and sheds are opening on alternate days, are forcing farmers to sell the produce at very low rates. The grade A apples, which are usually sold for Rs 1,000-1,200 around this time of the year are now going for Rs 500-600.

Farmers worry that if the demand does not pick up for agricultural produce they are looking at not just mounting costs due to fertilizers, pesticides, labor and transportation all of which have become expensive due to restricted supply, while they will not be able to realize the right price for their apples.

Transportation costs during the lockdown shot upto Rs 200 Per box the costs in normal times ranged from Rs 40-80. Rate of wodden boxes have also doubled upto Rs 80 from past years due to scarcity. Labour prices are already high. Add to this the surge in charges of fertilizer and pesticides



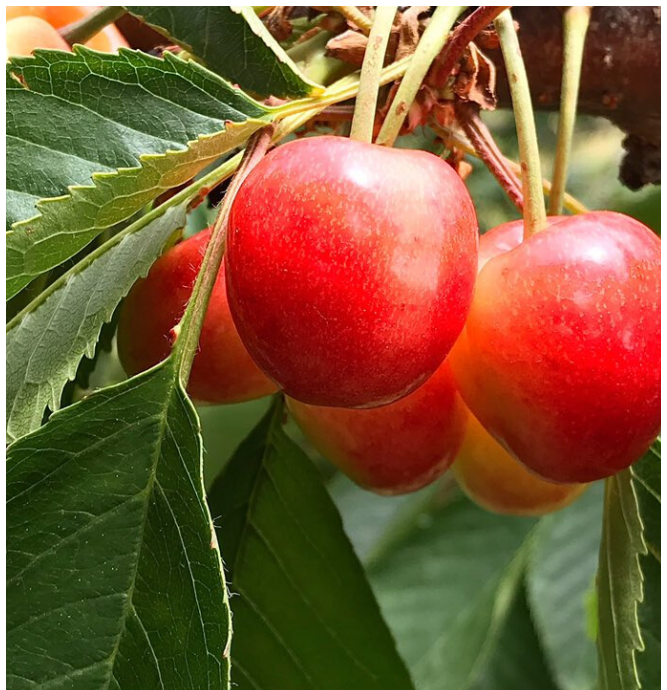
All this has increased the the cost of production to a level where farmers have taken huge amount of loans to sustain horticulture crops. Sudden disruptions in market access and demand slump has created an existential crisis for many small and marginal farmers. Farmer organisations have demanded waiving off the loans from the government as well as provision of mechanisms for sales and marketing with the state during the pandemic are also being demanded. Farmers find the relief provided under the PM-KISAN scheme of Rs 2000 to be very inadequate in the wake of current challenges.

Many farmers also complain of longstanding issue of fake pesticides being sold that do not have the desired effect on the pests and disease which increases the overall number of sprays required to 15-16 which is around more than 50 percent increase over the past years. Due to excessive use of pesticides the pests have also become resistant to sprays and that results into massive loss of produce.



This year, Massive hailstorm and gusty winds caused extensive damage to orchards, paddy saplings in several parts of Kashmir - Sopore, Baramulla, Kulgam, Bandipora, Pulwama. Farmers have suffered heavy losses due to massive hailstorm which have damaged their standing crops and vegetables add to that the fall in produce due to losses to disease and it becomes very unfeasible for a farmer to sustain horticulture. This is leading to loss of interest in the practice and more and more farmers are going for safer crops.

Cherry, the first fruits crop that has started to be harvested across Kashmir. Kashmir produces 13,000 to 15,000 tonnes of cherries of which around 3500-4000 tonnes is sold in other states. The demand slump and disruptions have cut down the prices realized by farmers to around half even in local mandis.



The marginally higher prices in mandis outside the state are offset due to higher transportation costs where farmers in past years used to easily realize around Rs 140-150. Kashmir produces four types of cherries, that is, Awwal Number, Double, Mishri and Makhmali of which the latter to account for almost half of the sale with the total market value of Cherry crop ranging somewhere around Rs 150-200 crore. Situation is so adverse that cherry growers for the first time are demanding a MSP of Rs. 100 for the fruits from the government. Low shelf life of the fruit and demand crash in local market due to closure of hotels and bakeries is adding to the woes. Even the processing plants such as canning factories are facing a hard time operating due to negligible local demand.



Rural Action Lab is a young group of researchers, students, and professionals trying to understand better the problems faced by rural communities of India. We are spread across 20 states and are constantly in touch with the local communities to deliberate the possible innovative solutions and data-driven interventions. This report is part of series on Impact of COVID -19 lockdown on Agricultural Incomes. For more such reports you can visit our website ruralactionlab.in .This report has been curated and edited by Dhananjay for Rural Action Lab

About the Author



Basit Nabi Wani from Sopore is a farmer, student as well as an expert on all things Kashmir. Apart from pursuing Phd From Baba Ghulam Shah Badshah University, Rajauri he takes care of his apple orchards and keeps an keen eye on happenings in agriculture sector in Kashmir. He is associated with Rural Action Lab as a State Co-ordinator for Kashmir.