Mechanised cotton farming boosts crop productivity, farmers' income

INITIATIVE Punjab first off the blocks with pilot project in districts of Fazilka, Muktsar and Bathinda

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CHAIDARGAR: Punjab has become the first state in the country to adopt mechanisation in cotton farming as a pilot project.

According to government officials, the move has led to an increase in the yield as well as farmers' income, besides resolving the problem of labour shortage this kharif season that ended in December 2014.

About 1,500 acres were brought under "complete mechanisation" in selected villages of Fazilka, Muktsar and Bathinda districts through seed planters and cotton-picking machines imported from China. These were given to farmers on custom-hire basis through cooperative societies.

"There has been 11 to 18% increase in the farmers' overall income through mechanisation. We still have a long way to go in the entire cotton belt of southern Punjab," financial commissioner development (PCD) Suresh Kumar told HT.

Punjab Agricultural University (PAU), Ludhiana, would be roped in "to improve the packages and practices" required for cotton cultivation under the new mechanised production regime, he added.

Five hydraulic seed planters were provided to farmers at a hiring price of 34,000 per acre, along with growth chemicals, with a view to fix the plant height at 4.5 ft to suit plucking machines for easy harvesting.

Of the 1,482 acres targeted under the project, 975 were covered in Fazilka district, 375 in Muktsar and 102 in Bathinda.

A maximum of 374 acres were covered in Dutarawali village of Fazilka, where farmers having less than 5 acres of land were also involved, said Umesh Patti, regional executive of the US-based John Deere Tractors, which has been instrumental in the supply of cotton farm machinery manufactured and assembled in China.

A cotton dryer plant has been installed at the grain market in Malout (Muktsar) so as to facilitate farmers and purchasing agencies in speedy procurement of cotton arrivals.

"Although the weather remained inclement, the experiment was successful, leading to a 25% increase in the yield," said Punjab Agro Industries Corporation managing director Kahan Singh Pannu, who drafted the pilot project during his tenure as secretary agriculture.

Pannu ruled out that mechanisation would hit the interests of the landless peasantry mainly cotton-plucking women.