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Hybrid rice faces competition

HASIBUR RAHMAN BILU

"Farmers are interested in growing the traditional varieties as they are easier to manage. At same time, they can market the traditional varieties easily at better prices"

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HYBRID rice faces a test in winning the hearts of farmers. In the last two seasons, both sales and acreage of hybrid rice, dubbed as a means to boost production and ensure food sufficiency, have dropped.

In the immediate past boro rice season, the area brought under hybrid rice fell to 6.72 lakh hectares from 7.2 lakh hectares in the previous boro season in fiscal 2009-10, as farmers preferred the cultivation of traditional high yielding varieties (HYV) of rice -- BR 28 and BR-29.

This is the lowest ever acreage of hybrid rice since the peak in fiscal 2008-09, when farmers grew hybrid rice on 8.14 lakh hectares.

Seed sellers blamed low market demand and low prices of hybrid rice than the HYVs behind the fall in the cultivation of hybrid, which is claimed to ensure 20 percent higher yield than the traditional HYVs.

They said hybrid rice loses out to HYVs amid rising demand for better quality rice among consumers. Stakeholders say hybrid rice becomes softer after cooking.

It also falls behind the dominant HYVs -- BR-28 and BR-29 -- in terms of taste and thus remains as

least preferred rice to millers and traders due to a lack of interest among consumers.

"People do not like to consume it because of the poor quality of rice after cooking," said Nirod Boron Saha, a rice trader and miller at Naogaon, one of the main rice trading areas in the north.

Because of the lack of interest among consumers, Saha, like other traders and millers, offer the lowest price for the coarse rice. Currently hybrid paddy sells at Tk 600-650 a maund (37.320 kilograms) where as HYVs, such as BR-28, BR-29, sell at Tk 720-Tk 790, he said.

"Why should I buy huge quantities if people do not eat it," asks the trader who purchases hybrid rice to sell to the government.

He said the sale of hybrid rice peaks only in times of food shortage. At other times, demand remains lukewarm.

Hybrid rice maintained growth in cultivation till fiscal 2008-09 since it was allowed for farming in Bangladesh in the new millennium.

The pace of growth in cultivation of the rice faltered in fiscal 2009-10 when prices dropped after high production in fiscal 2008-09.

Hybrid rice output fell 13 percent to 32.22 lakh tonnes in 2009-10 from 37.25 lakh tonnes in the year before, according to Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS).

"Sales of hybrid seeds have become stagnant for the last two years because of low market prices of hybrid rice," said Mohammad Masum, chairman of the biggest hybrid rice marketer Supreme Seed Company Ltd.

Masum said the yield of hybrid has not dropped, but low prices have narrowed the margins of farmers.

"In the past, a hybrid farmer had 20 percent more financial gains than that of a traditional rice farmer. But the gap declined to 6-7 percent because of low prices," said Masum.

The downward trend in sales and hybrid rice coverage coincides with allegations of crop failure in some areas over growing hybrid rice.

In the just concluded boro season, farmers in the south-eastern region of Noakhali protested crop losses for growing hybrid rice seeds named jhalak.

Anwar Faruque, director general of seed wing of agriculture ministry, said hybrid rice is losing out to other traditional varieties among farmers for low prices and a lack of demand among consumers and millers.

"Farmers are interested in growing the traditional varieties as they are easier to manage. At same time, they can market the traditional varieties easily at better prices," he said.

Out of 47 lakh hectares of land, farmers grew the inbred varieties on over 40 lakh hectares of land, he said.

Sudhir Chandra Nath, who looks after BRAC's agro division, said the cultivation of hybrid rice is on the downturn in multiple crop areas, such as the north. But in single boro crop areas, such as the northeast, hybrid cultivation is up.

"Farmers in the multiple crop areas cultivate boro after harvesting vegetables like potato. Due to this reason, they prefer growing the traditional HYVs," he said, citing that the yield gap between inbred and hybrid rice narrows for delayed cultivation of hybrid rice.

The seed wing official favours bringing up to 40 percent of boro land under hybrid cultivation and said cultivation should be popularised to ensure food security for the growing population on an area of 1.47 lakh square kilometres.

"We have no way but to increase the cultivation of hybrid rice to boost food production and attain food security," Faruque said. "Farmers need to be trained."

Masum of Supreme Seed agreed and urged the government to consider steps to increase hybrid rice cultivation.

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Farmers lose out on food procurement delays

HASIBUR RAHMAN BILU, Bogra

FARMERS in the northern district of Bogra will count huge losses this season because of the government's delay in the food procurement programme.

On the other hand, food department officials said the government will have to spend an additional Tk 388.36 crore for rice procurement from last year's figure.

Food department officials said the government began rice and paddy procurement on May 1 last year that continued till September. But this year, the government started procuring only rice June 5, aiming to achieve more than 388 lakh tonnes of rice from 16 districts of Rajshahi and Rangpur.

It fixed the price at Tk 29 a kilogram, which was Tk 28 last year. The food department has procured more than 1.30 lakh tonnes till now, while the programme will continue till September 30.

Bangladesh Auto Major and Husking Mill Owner's Association Convener K M Layek Ali said farmers would have been benefited if the government rice procurement had started on time like last year.

"Some rice mill owners have failed to sign an agreement with the food department to supply rice for the delay in decision," said Ali. The food department has signed agreements with 8,163 millers out of a total 9,000 mills in the region, he added.

Farmer Salauddin Mondal, 42, of the Mundail village of Khetlal Upazial in Joypurhat district, said he sold 10,320 kilograms of the BR-29 paddy variety before the govern-



Two men are at work in a rice mill in Bogra.

HASIBUR RAHMAN BILU

ment began the procurement programmes and made a loss of Tk 36,120. "Now, the same quality of paddy is selling at Tk 650 per 40 kilograms in the open market in Khetlal Upazila and some other places in the district."

"I had to count a huge loss by selling paddy in mar-

ket for the delay," said Mondal.

Farmer Abdul Zabbar, 56, of Joharipara village in Kurigram Sadar Upazila, said he counted a loss by selling 400 kilograms of the BR-28 paddy variety in the early stage.

"Now we are selling the same variety at Tk 780 per 40 kilograms, which sold at a highest of Tk 640 before."

Due to the late start of the government's food procurement programme, farmers had to sell their paddy at low prices in the early stage, Zabbar said.

Most farmers in the northern districts had to sell the 'Shathi' variety of paddy in the early stages at Tk 480 to Tk 500 per 40 kilogram; it was priced at Tk 600 last year.

Most varieties of rice were sold in the northern districts at prices lower than last year because of a high production of paddy and the delay in government procurement, according to food department officials.

Ali Ahmed, owner M/S Shiplu Rice Mill at Kahaloo Upazila in Bogra district, said he signed an agreement with the Bogra food department to supply 73,780 tonnes of rice this year, which is almost half of the agreement he signed last year.

"I think farmers in the area had to sell paddy at low price because of the delay in government procurement we have also lost money for the same reason," said Ahmed.

Food officials said most millers will get a minimum of Tk 300 as profit by selling byproducts per 1,000 kilograms of rice; it was Tk 250 on an average last year.

Ahmed agreed but said it is likely to drop in the next few days because of the high price of paddy and bad weather.

Abudulla Al Mamun, regional controller (RC) of the regional food department in Rajshahi, said over the phone that the non-stop rain in some northern districts has hampered rice procurement.