

'India can export 8-10 mt wheat'

India's wheat export scenario has changed drastically in less than a month. From focus on touching a new record, talk has not veered on to the subject of curbing overseas shipments. NITI Aayog member **RAMESH CHAND** discusses these matters and more with Sanjeeb Mukherjee. Edited excerpts:

What is your assessment of the wheat supply-and-demand scenario? There is a lot of talk of production falling.

According to our assessment, wheat production in 2022-23 is expected to be around 6-10 million tonnes (mt) less than the second Advance Estimates of foodgrain production, which, in February, had estimated wheat output at 111.3 mt.

Given the changed scenario, what is your assessment on procurement?

My understanding is that we normally require around 21 mt of wheat in a year under the National Food Security Act. Now that we have extended the free foodgrain scheme by another six months, we will

require another 9-10 mt. The government will need 30-32 mt to meet all its commitments.

On April 1, we had 19 mt in stock. Even if this stock gets depleted by another 13-14 mt and we manage to procure 20 mt of wheat, we should be comfortably placed.

So you think procurement won't be less than 20 mt?

I don't think procurement will be less than 20 mt. We breached 13 mt as of April 25. As far as procurement goes, the situation is not alarming.

Do you think there is a need to curb wheat export after factoring in developments like a drop in production, sluggish procurement, etc?



"WE HAVE EXTENDED THE FREE FOOD GRAINS SCHEME FOR ANOTHER SIX MONTHS, WE WILL REQUIRE (TO PROCURE) 9-10 MILLION TONNES MORE"

Given the present scenario of production and procurement, India can afford to export 8-10 mt of wheat, even after penciling in a 10-mt drop in production. Until that happens, there is no panic button to press. However, we should keep an eye on the emerging situation and take steps accordingly.

A fortnight ago, India was enthusiastic about wheat export. Do you think the government miscalculated the emerging scenario and failed to anticipate what lies ahead?

If you had asked me a month back, I'd have said India in all

likelihood would have exported at least 15 mt of wheat. No one knew a brutal heatwave was lurking around the corner. One can understand temperatures rising 2-3 degrees Celsius above normal. But who would have expected mercury to rise 6-7 degrees Celsius above normal in April. Imagine had we not factored in exports and the crop was normal, prices would have crashed. Considering that production was initially estimated to be a record 111.3 mt, talk of promoting exports was indeed justified.

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