

SOPs for safe wheat operations in the Context of COVID-19

By: Dr Abid Qaiyum Suleri & Maryam Shabbir

Wheat Operations amid Coronavirus outbreak

Wheat is the main food crop of Pakistan, which is usually cultivated across the country on an area of over 9 million hectares. In 2020, the production target of wheat grain is 27.03 million tons and its support price is Rs 1400 per 40 Kg. Wheat harvesting has already been started in Sindh province whereas in the Punjab and other provinces, it is about to start.

Generally, the wheat is harvested manually (with sickles), semi-mechanized (with reapers followed by threshing) and fully mechanized ways (with combine harvesters). The Punjab which produces about 80 per cent of the crop, can be divided into three cropping zones; Cotton belt (Southern Punjab), Rice belt (Central Punjab), and rain-fed agriculture belt (Potohar). In cotton belt, large farmers prefer mechanized harvesting whereas small farmers rely on manual harvesting. Majority of farmers in rice belt rely reapers whereas most of the farmers in rain-fed areas go for manual harvesting.

After harvesting, the next step will be its procurement by the provincial food departments, and Pakistan Agricultural Storage and Services Corporation (PASSCO), a federal agency working in storage of agriculture products. Besides, flour mills and small millers (*chakkis*) too are allowed to procure directly from the farmers.

This year, Punjab Food Department would be procuring 4.5 million tons of wheat, Sindh around 1.2 million tons, and PASSCO around 1.6 million tons. Around 9 to 10 million tons of wheat would be procured by flour mills while rest would be saved by farmers for their day-to-day consumption.

Owing to current outbreak of Covid-19, a foolproof strategy and Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) are needed for the successful harvesting, threshing and procurement of the crop keeping the farmers / labour safe. It is pertinent to mention that majority of the labour working in cities now tend to move to their hometowns. Even if small percentage of them is potential carrier, it can spread the pandemic in rural areas of the Punjab too. In this context, people living in villages and town will become more vulnerable and sensitive to Coronavirus infections. Therefore, during the different stages of wheat operations, health of farmers should be the top priority.

Different stages of wheat operations:

1. Jute bags (*bar dana*) distribution among farmers
2. Harvesting (manual and mechanical) and packing in the field
3. Transportation of wheat to procurement centers
4. Procurement (by Provincial Food Departments and PASSCO)
5. Payments

In the light of above-mentioned stages of wheat operations, this policy review suggests following SOPs before and after the harvesting starts.

Steps for Implementation of SOPs

1. Dissemination of SOPs

Once prepared, the SOPs should be disseminated among general public in wheat command areas. It is recommended that:

- SOPs should be in pictorial form considering high illiteracy among farm labourers particularly women workers.
- Pictorial charts of SOPs should be prominently displayed at all points of concentration.
- Local channels (e.g., mosques, numberdars, CSOs, FM radios) should be used for the dissemination of SOPs
- Mobile messaging (voice mails, Robo-calls) in local languages should be sent. Field staff of Provincial Agri. Extension Departments have mobile phone numbers of the farmers, so their contacts can be used effectively for SOPs dissemination.

2. Safety of Fieldworkers

The safety of people, who work through the chain of activities during wheat operations, should be the top priority. They must be prevented from Coronavirus infection while those caught up by the disease should be provided medical help. Prevention includes appropriate protective gear for farm labourers, operators of semi-automated reapers and combine harvesters, post-harvest ancillary workers, transporters, packers, and procurement officials. For each farm labourer, Agriculture Eextension Department and for procurement related operations, relevant procurement agency, must supply the protective clothing, masks, gloves, hand-washing arrangements. In addition, a safe distance among workers during all operations must be ensured. National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA) should assist these agencies through the central pool.

3. Jute Bags (bar dana) & Polypropylene (PP) Bags distribution among farmers

For procurement purposes, Punjab Food Department provides jute bags and PP bags against a security deposit of Rs 230 per bag and Rs 34 per bag respectively. Farmers have to arrange for these bags before harvesting so that they might store their harvest till it is sold. We recommend that these bags must be supplied at the doorstep of farmers (through PM's Corona Relief Tigers force) rather than asking all the farmers to rush to the procurement centers.

To minimize the concentration of people at the banks, the online security deposit facility may be introduced. For those who may not be able to use online services, mobile banking vans should be arranged for them where people could deposit their security payment under Corona protection safety guidelines.

4. Harvesting

As the mechanical harvesting through combine harvesters and reapers involves less labour, so it should be promoted through mass scale awareness campaigns for farmers. This awareness should be in the form of infographics and in local languages.

Where there is no economy of scale involved, i.e. small holdings, the government may buy unharvested wheat crop of multiple contiguous farms and get it harvested mechanically.

To make mechanical harvesting affordable, district administration would have to ensure that machine owners don't charge unreasonably high rents. Price guidelines may be issued and enforced by the district administration.

Harvester drivers may be educated on the following lines;

- I. They must disinfect the frequently touchable parts of their machinery like steering, knobs, gear handles, break levers etc. with surface disinfectants before the start and close of their work on daily basis.
- II. Frequent change of drivers on same machine must be avoided.
- III. Drivers must have daily showers and cloth change after finishing their work

Special permits must be issued for the movement of harvesting machinery and skilled labour involved in mandatory service across wheat production regions.

During a complete or partial lockdown, farm machinery workshops and spare-part shops should remain open for the timely completion of wheat harvesting. Going forward from wheat agencies providing seed for cotton sowing must be allowed to open their offices.

SOPs for Farm Workers and Owners

Implementation of the screening protocols of farm workers involved in wheat harvesting across provinces, districts and regions is urgently needed and must be followed. Farm workers, operators, drivers, packers, etc., must be told beforehand about their care protocols as well as their rights and responsibilities. Their foremost rights are:

- Working in a corona safe environment;
- Access to health care if they get ill;
- Continued supply of food and provision of other necessities of life (through Social Safety nets); and
- If gets ill and cannot work at the farm, he will be paid for their work promptly.

Similarly, responsibilities of farm owners should include:

- Farm workers would be educated on social distancing and personal hygiene.
- Children, old age people and women will not be engaged in wheat harvesting.
- People suffering from cold, flu, sinus infection or allergy will not be involved in harvesting.
- At least one-meter distance among labourers will be kept during harvesting.
- Hand shaking and hugging will be prohibited.
- Farm workers will be asked to wash their hands frequently with soap.
- They will be bound to cover their mouth in case of sneezing or coughing.
- They will be taught not touch face, nose and eyes frequently.
- They will be provided drinking water by adding lemon in it to get vitamin C.
- They will use personal glasses/cups while drinking water and will not be allowed to share food with each other.
- Sanitizing of their harvesting equipment (sickle etc.) with surface disinfectants will be ensured.
- In case of cough, fever and sneezing, they should stay at home and inform the farm owner/contractor/other colleagues (as the case may be) so that they could be taken to the nearest testing Center or isolation facility.
- The Agriculture Extension Dept should have a list of these centers with their addresses and phone numbers along with the local helplines.

Use of Sanitizers and Disinfectants

As the sanitizers and disinfectants commercially available in the market are not affordable by common farmers, Chlorine bleach may be used as an alternate. Wheat harvesting labour may be educated to use it for disinfecting their equipment (both mechanical & manual). Another alternate may also be a homemade sanitizer by using commercial rubbing alcohol, glycerin, liquid paraffin, etc.

Mobile hand-washing stations (can be the metal basins used at weddings), which are cheap and easily available in rural areas, must be provided during the wheat operations.

NOTE:

This policy review is the outcome of a consultation with the members of National Security Division Food Security Advisory Group. The members are:

- Dr Abid Qaiyum Suleri, Executive Director, SDPI
- Dr Muhammad Azeem Khan, Chairman, Pakistan Agriculture Research Council
- Dr Qamar uz Zaman, Vice-Chancellor, PMAS Arid Agriculture University, Rawalpindi
- Dr Iqrar Khan, Former Vice-Chancellor, University of Agriculture Faisalabad
- Ms Simi Kamal, Water Sector Expert
- Ms Rabia Sultan, Progressive Farmer
- Dr Babar Shahbaz, Associate Professor, University of Agriculture, Faisalabad
- Mr Anjum Sardar, Deputy Secretary, Technical Food Department, Punjab

Special Invitees:

- Dr Abid Mahmood, Director General Ayub Agriculture Research Center, Faisalabad
- Ms Maryam Shabbir, SDPI