

Red Rot fungus infestation in high-yielding sugarcane variety leads to hunt for a new strain

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The famed Co-0238 high-yielding sugarcane variety that has placed India on the verge of becoming the world's largest sugar producer has run into trouble due to a 'Red Rot' infestation, forcing the government to hunt for a new strain to check a possible slump in output in the coming years.

Coimbatore-based Sugar Breeding Institute (ICAR-SBI), a constituent of the Indian Council of Agricultural Research, has started working on a project to develop a variety that will address the problem of the fungal disease besides increasing cane yield and recovery rate (percentage of sugar to sugarcane).

The new variety is being developed at the institute's Karnal-based centre, which may

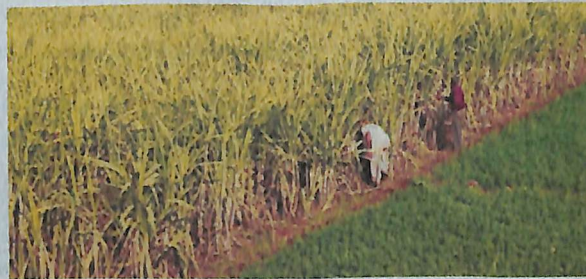
take up to three years to become ready for commercial use, ICAR-SBI Director Bakshi Ram told IANS.

"Broadly, there are three characters we are working on. These are increasing cane yield, resolving the Red Rot problem and improving sugar recovery. But the focus in the new variety is on the Red Rot issue. It is welcoming if other two characters also gets better," he said.

A cancer

This fungal infection is said to be the most threatening sugarcane disease, commonly termed its cancer.

The area under Co-0238 has increased at a faster rate in subtropical regions after it was released in 2009-10, and now covers 1.19 million hectares.



In 2017-18, this variety made for a sugar recovery rate of over 13 per cent or production of 12.05 million tonnes in Uttar Pradesh alone as against the total production of around 32.25 mt in the country.

Sugar production in India in 2018-19 is expected to improve on the previous year's record, which can make the country largest global producer, provided Brazil continues

with its decision to earmark more cane for producing ethanol.

Rapid proliferation

Infestation of 'Red Rot' was first seen in 2016 in some pockets but its rapid proliferation has caused great worry to farmers, an official of the National Federation of Cooperative Sugar Factories (NFCFSF) said.

"Cane growers in Uttar Pra-

desh are slowly shifting to other varieties such as Co-0118 as the recovery rate of Co-0238 has gone down due to the infestation. We think this variety may be phased out in the next four-five years," said NFCFSF Managing Director Prakash Naiknavare.

Bakshi Ram said the fungus infestation occurred mainly in the water-logged areas in central Uttar Pradesh, where the Co-0238 variety was not recommended.

"The infestation occurred due to plantation of the Co-0238 variety with other susceptible cane varieties in the water-logged areas," he pointed out.

Replantation of with new Co-0238 seeds can provide relief to farmers and this advisory has been sent to all sugar mills in the state, he added.