

EVERYDAY AGRICULTURE

Fair & average quality wheat: norms, relaxation

ANJU AGNIHOTRI CHABA
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THE CENTRE on Sunday relaxed the Fair and Average Quality (FAQ) norms for wheat in the ongoing rabi marketing season in Punjab, Haryana, and Chandigarh by a factor of three, raising the permissible limit of "shrivelled and broken grains" to 18% from the existing 6%. Unseasonal heat in March, when the rabi crop goes through its grain-filling stage, has led to shrivelling, making the grain unfit for procurement as per the usual quality norms.

Procurement norms

Every year, before procurement begins in this region in April, the Storage and Research division of the Department of Food & Public Distribution in the Union Ministry of Consumer Affairs, Food & Public Distribution, notifies specifications to ensure the quality of the procured wheat. This year, wheat con-

taining up to 0.75% foreign matter, 2% damaged grain, 4% slightly damaged grain, 6% shrivelled and broken grain, and 12% moisture was cleared for procurement.

The specifications are implemented at the time of procurement by personnel from the quality control wing of the Food Corporation of India (FCI).

Grain that looks good

FAQ wheat is fully developed, and has a proper lustre. The main varieties are golden or pale yellow, the grain is not dark, and it does not have any streaks. It is properly dry, and meets all nutritional conditions, the values of which are tested in the lab in case of doubt.

"If a layman takes a handful of wheat and finds the grain is shiny and beautiful, it would usually mean that the wheat meets FAQ," an FCI quality control inspector said. The QC wing conducts physical and chemical analyses during the procurement process, and on the stored crop, the inspector said.



FAQ specifies texture, colour and content of wheat grain. *Express Archive*

Previous relaxations

The government has in the past relaxed norms for moisture content and loss of lustre following heavy rain during the harvesting season, when ripe crops were flattened, and the grain turned blackish. This is the first time, however, that such a major relaxation has been

allowed for shrivelled grain, FCI officials said. They could not recall a previous relaxation for shrivelled grain of more than perhaps 1-2%.

Is the wheat bad?

The relaxation of procurement parameters to "reduce the hardship of farmers and avoid distress sale of wheat" does not mean the quality of the grain is bad. "The grains are smaller in size, but there is no loss of quality. The quality control wings of both FCI and the government have carried out several tests on the shrivelled grain, and found only weight loss, not a loss of quality," a senior FCI officer said, adding that this wheat will now be called "Under Relaxed Specifications (URS) wheat" instead of FAQ.

Several senior scientists at Punjab Agricultural University, Ludhiana, also said the shrivelling has caused only loss of yield and lower milling recovery, not deterioration of quality or nutritional value, and the protein content of the grain remains intact.