

Mechanisation is driving agriculture in Canada's Saskatchewan

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The unending swathes of standing crop in myriad hues of green and yellow in the countryside of Canada's Saskatchewan province not only present a visual delight, but also indicate the robust health of the region's agriculture sector.

Considered to be the backbone of the province's economy, the farmers of Saskatchewan manage to counter the cold weather conditions and scarce availability of labour to grow cereal grains like wheat, oat and barley, besides oil seeds and pulses that contributed to the more than \$11 billion in agricultural exports from the province last year.

"We have to rob a crop between two snows," said Franck Groeneweg, a farmer in Edgeley, about 50kms from Regina, Saskatchewan's second biggest urban centre. With little or no agricultural activity possible during the winter months spreading from November to April, farmers typically begin seeding soon after snow melts in May followed by spraying herbicide and protecting their crop from diseases in June, July and August, before harvesting in September and October by when the cold weather begins to set in again.

For a province with more than 18 million hectares of cultivated farmland populated by just over one million people, land holding among the farmers is staggeringly high. If the average land holding in India is barely two hectares, it is more than 490 in Saskatchewan. But, with it comes the challenge of managing the farmlands in the absence of farm labour.

“We have to use farm equipments, which are increasingly become bigger and expensive”, said Mr. Groeneweg pointing to a \$350,000 multi-purpose tractor, used for seeding as well as harvesting, parked in his garage along with a motley set of other farm equipments.

Mr Groeneweg, who grows wheat, peas and canola on his 3,000 hectares of land, said he invests around \$2 million every year on equipments, which are phased out in turns once every five years, besides \$1.5 million on other farm inputs like seeds, fertilizers etc.

For a farm of his size, Mr. Groeneweg, in his late thirties, makes do with two trainees from France, besides a retired driver. “It means a lot of work through the week during the agriculture-intensive months”. He is ably assisted by his wife Kari, who not only manages the farm book-keeping and cash flow, but is also the home educator for their four children.

With farm labour difficult to come by, Kevin Price, Trading Manager at Agrocorp International, a company engaged in shipping commodities to India, said family members of farmers, who are professionals in different fields, apply leave during the summer months to work in the farm.

Even though most of the farmlands are rain-fed, there is no need for irrigation as the region is blessed with cold weather conditions that leave enough moisture for the crops to sustain. If anything, crops are lost to wetness. “Last year, about 15 per cent of the crop was lost to excess moisture”, he said.

Dr. Yueshu Li, Director of Malting Technology at the Canadian Malting Barley Technical Centre in Winnipeg, said the 110 days of frost-free atmosphere in the region when there is prolonged period of daylight is perfect for growing good quality barley. The low temperature keeps the crop safe from pests, he added.

Migration of farmers to Canada

Though Canada welcomes farmers to buy and establish farm operations in its agriculture-intensive provinces like Saskatchewan and Manitoba, officials in charge of Investment Attraction and Immigration said few Indian farmers had opted to take up farming in Canada.

Many farmers from United Kingdom and other European countries had migrated to Canada under Farm Owner/Operator category or Young Farmer stream for those below 40 years. “Farming in Canada is capital intensive and technology driven. Farmers from Holland, Germany, UK and France, who are used to similiar climatic conditions and soil, have taken up agricultural operations here. Also, farm sizes in Canada are huge compared to India”, said Ajay Pandey, Business Immigration Officer, Government of Manitoba, Canada.

Canada is encouraging migration as its own farmers are retiring and their children are taking to different occupations.