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## Pakistan's Strawberry Sector: Growth, Challenges, and Future Prospects



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Crop Introduction, Importance, and Production in Pakistan:

The strawberry (*Fragaria × ananassa*) belongs to the Rosaceae family. It was first introduced in

Pakistan in the early 1960s in the northern regions, particularly in Swat and the hills surrounding Murree in Punjab. Since then, the cultivation area has steadily expanded across various provinces.

Strawberries are highly valued for their excellent flavor, nutritional content, and numerous health benefits. Rich in antioxidants, minerals, and phenolic compounds, strawberries are a notable dietary source of phosphorus, calcium, iron, magnesium, and potassium. Comprising about 90% water, they are both refreshing and hydrating, while being low in calories (32 kcal/100g). These properties make strawberries one of the most cherished fruits for both taste and health.

According to the Ministry of National Food Security & Research (MNFSR), recent strawberry production has reached approximately 2,054 tons, cultivated on about 559 hectares. Agricultural experts estimate a 22% rise in strawberry cultivation in Punjab in recent years. Pakistan currently ranks 66th globally in strawberry production. Cultivation has expanded across provinces, with notable production in Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. In Punjab, districts such as Sialkot, Gujranwala, Lahore, Khushab, Sargodha, Faisalabad, Jhang, Sahiwal, Multan, Bahawalpur, and Rahim Yar Khan have witnessed significant growth in strawberry farming.

**Current Scenario and Challenges Faced by Farmers:**

Farmers face several challenges, particularly those arising from climate change, such as temperature extremes, humidity, and unpredictable rainfall. Strawberries are highly sensitive to heat and cold stress, which affect both yield and quality. Unseasonal warmth can trigger early blooming, exposing crops to potential frost damage. Conversely, cold spells can delay flowering and reduce yields. Excessive rainfall can cause root rot and fungal diseases, while drought conditions hinder fruit development. In recent years, the crop has been increasingly affected by early heatwaves, unexpected rain, and frost due to shifting climate patterns.

Common insect pests include aphids, spider mites, thrips, and the strawberry weevil, which damage roots, stems, leaves, flowers, and fruits. Additionally, gray mold (*Botrytis cinerea*) is considered the most economically destructive disease in strawberry cultivation, causing yield losses ranging from 20% to 50% or more.

#### Possible Solutions:

Climate-smart agricultural practices can help mitigate these risks. Strategies such as adjusting planting dates, using protective structures like shade nets and tunnels, and modifying farming calendars are essential. Protected cultivation methods—including greenhouses and tunnels—not only extend the growing season but also shield crops from adverse weather.

Training provided by government and agricultural institutions in climate adaptation, water

management, pest control, and sustainable farming boosts both resilience and productivity.

Practices like crop rotation, integrated pest management (IPM), and efficient irrigation systems contribute to improved soil health, pest control, and fruit quality.

Drip irrigation, in particular, delivers water directly to the roots, reducing evaporation and water usage by up to 50%, thereby enhancing yields and conserving resources.

#### Conclusion:

The adoption of climate-smart agricultural practices provides a sustainable path forward for strawberry production in Pakistan. These methods offer resilience against environmental stresses while improving productivity and resource efficiency, ensuring a more secure and profitable future for the sector.