
Ban Lifted on Cotton Seed Import in Pakistan after 50 Years

Published on July 27, 2025

Document Date: Mon, Jul 28 2025 01:36:14 am

Category: ,English,Green Pakistan -

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By: Furqan Ahmad

Cotton Expert and Lecturer, IPBB

Pakistan has lifted its 50-year-old ban on cotton seed imports, marking a major policy shift aimed at reviving the struggling cotton sector. Once producing 14.8 million bales in 2011–12, output fell to just 5.6 million bales in 2022–23 — a 62% decline. Contributing factors include extreme heat, erratic rainfall, pest resistance to Bt cotton (particularly pink bollworm), and diseases like Cotton Leaf Curl Virus (CLCuV) and Wilts. These challenges, coupled with rising input costs, have pushed many farmers toward more stable crops like sugarcane and maize. As a result, Pakistan now imports around 4 million bales annually to sustain its textile industry.

The government's decision to allow foreign cotton germplasm aims to introduce traits like higher yield, pest resistance, and climate resilience. Some Chinese hybrids, for example, have shown yield gains of over 30% in trials. The textile sector stands to benefit if these varieties succeed under local conditions. However, critics warn of serious risks: imported seeds may fail to adapt to Pakistan's extreme environment and could introduce new diseases, such as Fusarium wilt or novel viral strains.

Global experiences offer mixed lessons. India saw early success with Bt cotton but later suffered from pest resistance and high seed costs. Burkina Faso abandoned Bt cotton due to poor fiber quality. In contrast, Australia and Brazil have had more success, thanks to strong regulatory controls and localized breeding programs.

To avoid past mistakes, experts recommend limiting foreign seed use to breeding programs rather than direct commercial planting. Local varieties with proven heat and disease resilience can serve as a foundation. Rigorous quarantine protocols must screen imported seeds for pathogens.

Investment in public-sector breeding and promotion of non-GMO, drought-tolerant varieties—especially in areas like Baluchistan—is also key.

This policy shift is both a risk and an opportunity. If approached carefully, with strong regulation and local adaptation, it could revive Pakistan's cotton sector. But if mishandled, it could worsen

the crisis. The next few years will determine whether this becomes a turning point or a costly mistake.