

Floods, polls delay sugarcane crushing

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Floods and elections have pushed back sugarcane crushing in the country by at least two weeks. Maharashtra is likely to witness an even longer delay, as fields are still inundated.

Uttar Pradesh (UP), Maharashtra, and Karnataka together account for a little more than 60 per cent of the country's cane output. Unexpectedly heavy rainfall in September caused flooding in their cane belts.

Otherwise, the sugar season officially begins on October 1. By end-October, shows industry data, 36 mills, 75 mills, and 124 mills had started to operate in 2016, 2017, and 2018, respectively. Maharashtra also had a state Assembly election, another factor for delay. Cane crushing there is dominated by mills in the co-operative sector, where politicians dominate. The decision regarding crushing is traditionally taken by a ministerial committee, headed by the chief minister.

"Due to state elections this year, the meeting did not take place and therefore the date for start of crushing operations could not be finalised. However, we expect a decision in the next couple of days," Prakash Naiknavare, managing director of the National Federation of Cooperative Sugar Factories, told *Business Standard*.

He noted the decision would take into consideration the floods, crop damage and crushing in neighbouring Karnataka, since any delay in starting the mills could lead to diversion of the crop to the latter's mills. However, he underlined, crushing in Maharashtra was unlikely to start before November 15; there are also demands to start only from December 1 in the state. Indian Sugar Mills Association (Isma) secretary-general



Abinash Verma said, coupled with the flood factor, Maharashtra had lower cane production this season. "Our experience shows that in seasons of lower productivity, the crushing season is little delayed, for harvesting a more matured crop." In UP, the country's top sugar producer, crushing is expected to start only after November 10. "Due to Diwali, the labourers are likely to return only in a week's time," said Verma. "The boilers of mills would be fired around November 10, starting with western UP. Those in central and eastern UP would commence operations after November 15." Verma said earlier Isma projections on cane acreage and production had not factored in the late rainfall and flooding. This year, UP's cane area has fallen nearly four per cent to 2.68 million hectares (mha), compared to almost 2.8 mha in the 2018-19 crushing season, as a result of farmers in some districts shifting to other cash crops.

The highest area dips are in the western UP districts of Mathura, Aligarh, and Badaun, at 62, 33, and 32 per cent, respectively. However, some cane growing districts in UP have also sown more — Gorakhpur, Deoria, Meerut, and Shamli has reported rises of 43, 18, 14, and 13 per cent, respectively.