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China's farmers fear food shortages after coronavirus restrictions

Transport lockdown leads to scarcity of labourers and fertiliser ahead of planting season

Chinese farmers face a daunting planting season as they grapple with a shortage of labour, seed and fertiliser in the wake of a nationwide lockdown to control the spread of coronavirus. A Qufu Normal University survey last month of village officials in 1,636 counties found that 60 per cent of respondents were pessimistic or very pessimistic about the planting season. The dismal mood has raised fears of a food shortage in the world's most populous nation after disease control measures, led by traffic restrictions, took a toll on farming activity. "China's agricultural industry has collapsed without the free flow of labour and raw materials," said Ma Wenfeng, an analyst at CnAgri, a consultancy in Beijing. Chinese farms rely heavily on migrant workers and are struggling to find enough labourers after public transport was suspended to help stem the outbreak. Less than a third of local adults from 104 villages in 12 inland provinces had travelled outside their hometown for work after the lunar new year, according to Wuhan university. Normally, between 80 and 90 per cent of adults would be working elsewhere. Recommended Coronavirus China goes on the offensive to control global coronavirus narrative That has created problems for Wang Heqing, owner of a 94-hectare farm in the southern Guangdong province. He said 80 per cent of his workers were trapped at home in the western province of Guizhou because of the travel restrictions. Instead of growing cabbage and sweetcorn, as he had planned, Mr Wang switched to rice, which is less labour intensive. But rice sells for a fraction of the price of vegetables. "Labour shortages have dealt a heavy blow to vegetable farms in Guangdong," said Mr Wang, "but we have to work with what we have." Farmers also face a shortage of fertilisers and seeds. The problem is especially pronounced in Hubei province, the country's largest fertiliser producer and the centre of the coronavirus outbreak. Local factories have struggled to reopen as a result of the travel restrictions, which have been maintained despite a decline in the official number of new virus cases. An executive at Beifeng Agricultural Production Means Group, a big fertiliser distributor, said northeastern provinces, which produce most of the nation's grain, face a shortage of 1.3m tonnes of phosphate fertilisers, or 40 per cent of annual consumption. "We are going to have trouble maintaining agricultural output at a safe level if the shortfall doesn't ease in the coming 30 days," said the official. Analysts said a sharp fall in agricultural output, especially of grain, risked exacerbating food inflation, which hit a 12-year high of 21.9 per cent in February. That would present a political challenge to the ruling Communist party, which has already been accused of covering up the epidemic. "Chinese people may grumble when pork prices double," said a Beijing-based scholar, "but they will rise up against the party if rice prices take off."