Volume 3, Issue 10
October I 2025

Agri Roots
e- Magazine

www.agrirootsmagazine.in

ISSN: 2583-9071

Integrated Pest Management (IPM) in Cotton: A Paradigm for Sustainable Pest Control

ARTICLE ID: 0263

Dipu Kumar

Student, School of Agriculture & Environmental Sciences, Shobhit Deemed University, Meerut (U.P.)

Cotton (*Gossypium spp.*), often referred to as "white gold," is one of the most economically significant fiber crops worldwide, with over 30 million hectares under cultivation (ICAC, 2022). However, its intensive production systems are highly susceptible to a wide array of insect pests, notably lepidopteran bollworms (*Helicoverpa armigera*, *Pectinophora gossypiella*), sap-sucking insects such as aphids, jassids, and whiteflies (*Bemisia tabaci*), and invasive pests like mealybugs (*Phenacoccus solenopsis*).

Historically, pest control in cotton has relied heavily on synthetic insecticides. While initially effective, this approach has led to several negative consequences, including pest resistance, resurgence of secondary pests, reduction of beneficial insect populations, and ecological imbalance (Kranthi, 2012). These challenges necessitate a more holistic and sustainable pest management strategy—Integrated Pest Management (IPM).

IPM is a decision-support framework that integrates multiple pest control tactics—biological, cultural, mechanical, and chemical—based on ecological principles and economic thresholds. It is not merely a replacement for chemical pesticides but represents a paradigm shift towards knowledge-intensive, agroecologically sound practices (Pedigo & Rice, 2009).

Ecological and Theoretical Foundations of IPM in Cotton

IPM is anchored in ecological theories of population dynamics and trophic interactions. The core objective is to maintain pest populations below the Economic Injury Level (EIL), the point at which the cost of pest damage equals the cost of control. Economic Threshold Levels (ETLs) serve as operational triggers for intervention, ensuring that control measures are applied only when necessary (Pedigo & Rice, 2009).

The strategic framework of IPM includes:

1. **Preventive (Cultural) Practices**: Altering crop environments to make them less hospitable to pests.

2. **Biological Control**: Using predators, parasitoids, and pathogens.
3. **Mechanical And Physical Tactics**: Employing traps and manual methods.
4. **Chemical Control**: Used judiciously and only when thresholds are exceeded.

Components of IPM in Cotton Production Systems

Pest Surveillance and Forecasting

Effective IPM begins with accurate pest monitoring. Techniques include pheromone traps, yellow sticky traps, and field scouting. Digital innovations such as mobile apps, drone-based remote sensing, and AI-powered decision support systems (DSS) are increasingly being used to predict pest outbreaks and advise farmers in real time (Sharma et al., 2021). These technologies allow for precise, ETL-based interventions that prevent unnecessary pesticide use.

Cultural and Host Plant Resistance Strategies

Cultural control includes early sowing, intercropping, deep ploughing, trap cropping (e.g., with marigold or okra), and removal of alternate hosts. One of the most significant advances in cotton IPM has been the introduction of Bt cotton, which expresses insecticidal proteins from *Bacillus thuringiensis*. Bt cotton has dramatically reduced bollworm infestations (Kranthi, 2012). However, resistance has emerged, especially in *Helicoverpa armigera* and *Pectinophora gossypiella*, making resistance management strategies like refugia planting and gene pyramiding essential (Tabashnik et al., 2013).

Biological Control

Conservation and augmentation of natural enemies are central to IPM. Key predators include:

- *Coccinellidae* (ladybird beetles),
- *Chrysopidae* (green lacewings),
- Spiders (various families).

Augmentative biological control through the release of parasitoids such as *Trichogramma chilonis* and entomopathogenic fungi (*Beauveria bassiana*, *Metarhizium anisopliae*) has shown effectiveness in suppressing bollworm and sucking pest populations (ICAR, 2021). Biopesticides, especially neem-based products (azadirachtin), are gaining popularity for their environmental safety and compatibility with beneficial arthropods.

Mechanical and Physical Control

Mechanical methods include hand-picking of egg masses and infested plant parts, especially during early crop stages. Solar-powered light traps and pheromone traps offer energy-efficient monitoring and control options. Sticky traps are useful against whiteflies and aphids. While labor-intensive, these methods are particularly viable in smallholder farming systems with adequate labor availability.

Rational Chemical Use

Chemical control under IPM is a last resort. When applied, it should involve:

- Use of selective, narrow-spectrum insecticides (e.g., spinosad, flubendiamide, emamectin benzoate),
- Rotational use of insecticides with different modes of action, per IRAC (Insecticide Resistance Action Committee) guidelines, to delay resistance,
- Precise application timing and dosages to reduce non-target impacts and residue accumulation.

Outcomes and Trade-Offs of IPM Adoption

Environmental and Ecosystem Benefits

IPM enhances agroecosystem resilience by reducing pesticide load, preserving natural enemies, and supporting pollinator populations. It aligns with One Health principles by minimizing pesticide residues in food, water, and soil, and lowering risks to human health (FAO, 2020).

Economic Impacts and Social Dimensions

Studies indicate that IPM can reduce input costs (mainly insecticides) and maintain or improve yield stability (FAO, 2020). However, widespread adoption is limited by factors such as:

- Farmer knowledge and risk perception,
- Access to reliable pest diagnostics and advisory services,
- Gender roles in decision-making,
- Institutional support mechanisms (extension, subsidies, credit).

Institutional Constraints

Challenges in IPM diffusion include:

- Fragmented extension services and poor public-private coordination,
- Weak regulatory frameworks governing pesticide use,
- Inadequate investment in biocontrol infrastructure and R&D.

There is a pressing need to strengthen institutional capacity, including training, policy support, and incentivizing sustainable practices.

Future Directions and Policy Implications

To mainstream IPM in cotton production systems, the following strategies are essential:

Curriculum Integration: IPM modules should be part of national agricultural education and extension curricula.

Digital Agriculture Platforms: Encourage use of mobile DSS and remote sensing to support real-time pest advisories.

Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs): Support biopesticide development, commercialization, and quality control.

Integrated Crop Management (ICM): Combine pest management with nutrient and water optimization.

Climate-Smart IPM: Integrate IPM with broader climate adaptation strategies to address emerging pests due to global warming.

Furthermore, transdisciplinary research involving agronomists, entomologists, data scientists, and social scientists is required to develop locally adapted, scalable IPM solutions.

Conclusion

Integrated Pest Management in cotton represents a shift from input-intensive to knowledge-intensive agriculture, promoting sustainability without compromising productivity. By integrating ecological, technological, and institutional innovations, IPM has the potential to make cotton production more resilient, environmentally friendly, and economically viable.

However, achieving widespread adoption demands coordinated efforts among policymakers, researchers, extension workers, and farmers. Future progress lies in leveraging digital tools, supporting biological alternatives, and fostering participatory innovation systems that empower farmers as ecological stewards.

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