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CRISPR-CAS9–MEDIATED DEVELOPMENT OF CLIMATE-RESILIENT WHEAT GENOTYPES UNDER HEAT AND DROUGHT STRESS CONDITIONS IN PAKISTAN

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Abstract
Wheat production in Pakistan is increasingly threatened by heat and drought stress induced by climate change, leading to significant yield instability and food security concerns. This study investigated the potential of CRISPR-Cas9–mediated genome editing for developing climate-resilient wheat genotypes with enhanced tolerance to abiotic stress conditions. A quantitative experimental design was employed under controlled greenhouse conditions, where CRISPR-edited wheat lines (single-gene and multi-gene) were evaluated against non-edited control genotypes under simulated heat and drought stress environments. Physiological, biochemical, and agronomic traits including photosynthetic rate, chlorophyll content, water-use efficiency, biomass accumulation, and grain yield were analyzed using ANOVA, correlation, and regression techniques. The results revealed that CRISPR-edited wheat genotypes significantly outperformed control plants across all measured traits, with multi-gene edited lines exhibiting the highest stress tolerance and yield stability. Statistical analysis confirmed significant genotype and stress interaction effects, indicating enhanced adaptability of edited lines under adverse conditions. The findings demonstrate that CRISPR-Cas9 technology substantially improves wheat resilience by enhancing physiological efficiency and stabilizing yield under extreme environmental stress. The study concludes that genome editing represents a promising strategy for sustainable wheat production in climate-vulnerable regions such as Pakistan.

INTRODUCTION

Wheat (*Triticum aestivum* L.) is a staple cereal crop and a fundamental component of food security in Pakistan, contributing significantly to caloric intake, rural livelihoods, and national agricultural output. However, wheat productivity is increasingly threatened by the adverse impacts of climate change, particularly rising temperatures and recurrent drought conditions. These abiotic stresses disrupt physiological and biochemical processes such as photosynthesis, stomatal regulation, and grain filling, ultimately leading to substantial yield losses (Farooq et al., 2019; Sehgal et al., 2020). Given Pakistan's semi-arid climate and limited water resources, the vulnerability of wheat production systems is expected to intensify in the coming decades.

Conventional breeding approaches have contributed to the development of improved wheat varieties; however, these methods are often time-consuming, resource-intensive, and limited in their ability to target specific stress-responsive genes. In contrast, modern genome editing technologies, particularly CRISPR-Cas9 (Clustered Regularly Interspaced Short Palindromic Repeats–Cas9), have emerged as powerful tools for precise and efficient genetic modification. CRISPR-Cas9 enables targeted gene knockouts or modifications, facilitating rapid improvement of complex traits such as drought tolerance, heat resistance, and yield stability (Chen et al., 2019; Jaganathan et al., 2018).

Recent advances in plant biotechnology have demonstrated the potential of CRISPR-Cas9 in enhancing abiotic stress tolerance by editing genes involved in hormonal signaling, antioxidant defense, and osmotic regulation. Studies have shown that targeted gene editing can significantly improve plant resilience under environmental stress conditions without introducing foreign DNA, thereby increasing its acceptance in modern agricultural systems (Zhang et al., 2020). Despite these advancements, the application of CRISPR-based genome editing in wheat improvement remains limited in developing countries, particularly in Pakistan, due to infrastructural, regulatory, and technical constraints.

In this context, there is an urgent need to explore genome editing approaches for developing climate-resilient wheat genotypes tailored to Pakistan's agro-ecological conditions. Integrating CRISPR-Cas9 technology into wheat breeding programs can potentially accelerate the development of stress-tolerant varieties, ensuring sustainable productivity under changing climate scenarios.

Problem Statement

Wheat production in Pakistan is increasingly constrained by heat stress and drought conditions, which are becoming more frequent and severe due to climate change. These environmental stresses significantly reduce crop yield, grain quality, and overall agricultural productivity. Despite the importance of wheat as a staple food crop, current breeding strategies in Pakistan have not been fully effective in developing highly resilient genotypes capable of withstanding extreme climatic variability.

Traditional breeding techniques are slow and limited in precision, often requiring multiple generations to achieve desirable traits. Although recent advancements in molecular breeding and genomics have improved crop improvement efforts, their application remains limited in national wheat improvement programs. Moreover, there is a substantial gap between advanced genome editing technologies and their practical implementation in Pakistan's agricultural research system.

CRISPR-Cas9 technology offers a promising solution for precise and rapid genetic modification; however, its application in wheat improvement under local climatic stress conditions remains underexplored. There is a lack of empirical and applied research focusing on the identification and editing of key stress-responsive genes specific to Pakistani wheat varieties. Additionally, institutional, technical, and regulatory barriers further hinder the adoption of genome editing technologies in crop improvement programs.

Therefore, there is a critical need to investigate the potential of CRISPR-Cas9–mediated gene editing for developing climate-resilient wheat genotypes capable of sustaining productivity under heat and drought stress conditions in Pakistan.

Research Questions

1. Which key genes are associated with heat and drought stress tolerance in wheat?
2. How can CRISPR-Cas9 technology be applied to target stress-responsive genes in wheat genotypes?
3. What is the potential impact of gene editing on physiological and yield-related traits under abiotic stress conditions?
4. To what extent can CRISPR-Cas9–mediated modifications improve climate resilience in wheat varieties grown in Pakistan?
5. What institutional and technical challenges affect the adoption of CRISPR-based wheat improvement in Pakistan?

Research Objectives

1. To identify key genes responsible for heat and drought stress tolerance in wheat.
2. To explore the application of CRISPR-Cas9 technology for targeted gene editing in wheat genotypes.
3. To evaluate the potential effects of gene editing on wheat physiological and yield performance under stress conditions.
4. To assess the effectiveness of CRISPR-Cas9 in developing climate-resilient wheat varieties suitable for Pakistan.
5. To examine the technical, regulatory, and institutional challenges associated with genome editing in wheat improvement programs.

Significance of the Study

Theoretical Significance

This study contributes to the growing body of knowledge in plant biotechnology and molecular breeding by extending the application of CRISPR-Cas9 technology to abiotic stress tolerance in wheat. It strengthens gene-editing theory in crop improvement by linking genomic precision with physiological stress response mechanisms. Furthermore, it enhances understanding of how targeted genome editing can be integrated into climate resilience frameworks in agriculture.

Practical Significance

The study provides practical insights for plant breeders, agricultural scientists, and biotechnology researchers by highlighting specific gene targets for improving wheat tolerance to heat and drought stress. It also offers a conceptual foundation for developing improved wheat varieties that can sustain productivity under extreme climatic conditions, thereby supporting food security in Pakistan.

Policy Significance

The findings are relevant for agricultural policymakers and regulatory bodies responsible for biotechnology governance in Pakistan. The study supports the need for developing clear biosafety regulations and national frameworks for genome editing technologies. It also emphasizes the importance of investing in advanced agricultural research infrastructure and promoting innovation-driven crop improvement strategies.

Literature Review

Climate Change, Wheat Production, and Abiotic Stress Challenges

Wheat is highly sensitive to environmental fluctuations, particularly heat and drought stress, which are increasingly prevalent in South Asia due to climate change. Elevated temperatures during anthesis and grain filling stages significantly reduce grain number, spike fertility, and final yield, while drought stress disrupts water uptake, photosynthetic efficiency, and nutrient transport (Farooq et al., 2019). In Pakistan, these challenges are intensified by water scarcity, irregular rainfall patterns, and rising average temperatures, making wheat production highly vulnerable to climate variability.

Recent literature emphasizes that abiotic stress tolerance in wheat is a complex trait governed by multiple genes and regulatory networks rather than single-gene control. This complexity limits the effectiveness of conventional breeding approaches, which rely on phenotypic selection over multiple generations (Sehgal et al., 2020). As a result, yield gains under stress conditions have plateaued in many wheat-growing regions, highlighting the need for advanced molecular interventions.

Advances in Genome Editing for Crop Improvement

The emergence of genome editing technologies has transformed agricultural biotechnology by enabling precise, targeted modifications in plant genomes. Among these, CRISPR-Cas9 has gained prominence due to its simplicity, efficiency, and ability to induce site-specific gene edits. Unlike traditional genetic modification techniques, CRISPR allows direct manipulation of endogenous genes without necessarily introducing foreign DNA (Chen et al., 2019).

In wheat, CRISPR-Cas9 has been successfully used to modify genes associated with yield improvement, disease resistance, and abiotic stress tolerance. Studies have demonstrated that editing genes involved in hormonal signaling pathways, transcriptional regulation, and stress-response mechanisms can significantly enhance plant resilience under adverse conditions (Jaganathan et al., 2018). However, wheat presents additional challenges due to its complex hexaploid genome, which complicates gene targeting and requires simultaneous editing of multiple homologous gene copies.

Despite these challenges, recent advancements in CRISPR multiplexing and base editing technologies have improved the feasibility of wheat genome editing. These innovations allow simultaneous modification of multiple genes, making it possible to address complex traits such as drought and heat tolerance more effectively (Zhang et al., 2020).

CRISPR-Cas9 and Abiotic Stress Tolerance Mechanisms

Abiotic stress tolerance in wheat is regulated by a wide range of physiological and molecular mechanisms, including osmotic adjustment, antioxidant defense, heat shock protein expression, and abscisic acid signaling pathways. CRISPR-Cas9 has been used to target key genes involved in these pathways, resulting in improved stress tolerance in experimental plant systems.

For instance, gene editing of transcription factors and regulatory genes has been shown to enhance drought tolerance by improving root architecture and water-use efficiency. Similarly, modifications in heat-responsive genes have demonstrated improved stability of photosynthetic machinery under high-temperature conditions (Zhang et al., 2020). However, most of these studies remain confined to controlled environments, and field-level validation under real agro-climatic conditions, particularly in developing countries like Pakistan, is still limited.

Although CRISPR technology has shown strong potential in crop improvement, several limitations hinder its widespread application in wheat breeding programs. One major challenge is the off-target effect, where unintended genomic modifications may occur, potentially affecting plant performance. Additionally, regulatory uncertainty regarding genome-edited crops creates barriers to commercialization and adoption, particularly in developing countries.

In Pakistan, limited access to advanced genomic laboratories, lack of trained personnel, and insufficient funding for biotechnology research further restrict the application of CRISPR-based wheat improvement strategies. Moreover, most existing studies focus on model plants or controlled laboratory conditions, with limited translation into field-based agricultural systems.

The literature clearly indicates several unresolved issues:

- Limited application of CRISPR-Cas9 in wheat under field-relevant heat and drought conditions
- Lack of integrated gene-editing strategies targeting multiple stress-responsive pathways
- Insufficient research on wheat genotypes specifically adapted to Pakistani agro-climatic conditions
- Weak institutional and technological infrastructure for genome editing in developing countries
- Limited empirical validation of CRISPR-based stress tolerance traits in real agricultural environments

Therefore, there is a strong need for systematic research focusing on CRISPR-Cas9–mediated development of climate-resilient wheat genotypes tailored for Pakistan.

Underpinning Theory

Gene Network Plasticity Theory (GNP Theory)

This study is underpinned by the Gene Network Plasticity Theory, which explains that phenotypic traits in organisms, particularly stress tolerance, are governed by dynamic and interconnected gene regulatory networks rather than isolated genes. According to this theory, environmental stresses such as heat and drought trigger complex molecular responses involving multiple interacting genes, transcription factors, and signaling pathways.

Justification of Applicability

The Gene Network Plasticity Theory is highly relevant to this study because wheat response to abiotic stress is polygenic and regulated through interconnected biological pathways. CRISPR-Cas9 technology enables precise modification of multiple genes within these networks, allowing researchers to reprogram stress-response pathways more effectively than traditional breeding methods.

In the context of this study, gene editing targets such as stress-responsive transcription factors, osmoprotectant regulators, and heat shock proteins can be strategically modified to enhance overall network resilience. This aligns with the theory's assumption that improving system-wide gene interactions leads to improved phenotypic stability under environmental stress.

Theoretical Contribution to the Study

- Explains wheat stress tolerance as a network-based biological response
- Supports multi-gene CRISPR editing strategies
- Justifies integrated genome editing approaches for complex traits
- Provides a conceptual foundation for linking molecular biology with climate resilience

Hypotheses

The following hypotheses were developed in line with the study objectives and are stated in a concise and statistically testable form:

H1: CRISPR-Cas9–mediated gene editing has a significant positive effect on heat stress tolerance in wheat genotypes.

H2: CRISPR-Cas9–mediated gene editing has a significant positive effect on drought stress tolerance in wheat genotypes.

H3: Edited wheat genotypes show significantly higher physiological performance (photosynthetic rate, water-use efficiency, and chlorophyll stability) under heat and drought stress compared to non-edited control genotypes.

H4: CRISPR-Cas9–edited wheat genotypes exhibit significantly higher yield stability under heat and drought stress conditions than conventional wheat varieties.

H5: Multi-gene CRISPR-Cas9 editing results in significantly greater stress tolerance than single-gene editing in wheat genotypes.

H6: There is a significant positive relationship between gene-editing efficiency and overall agronomic performance of wheat under abiotic stress conditions.

H7: CRISPR-Cas9–mediated gene modifications significantly improve overall climate resilience index of wheat genotypes under combined heat and drought stress conditions.

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopted a quantitative, experimental research design to evaluate the effectiveness of CRISPR-Cas9–mediated gene editing in developing climate-resilient wheat genotypes under heat and drought stress conditions. A controlled laboratory and greenhouse-based experimental approach was used to compare genetically edited wheat lines with non-edited control varieties under simulated abiotic stress environments.

Population

The population of the study consisted of wheat (***Triticum aestivum*** L.) genotypes commonly cultivated in Pakistan, along with their genetically edited variants developed through CRISPR-Cas9 technology. The study also included physiological and molecular responses of these genotypes under controlled environmental stress conditions.

Sampling Technique

A purposive and experimental selection technique was applied to select wheat genotypes based on their agronomic importance, genetic diversity, and adaptability to Pakistani agro-climatic conditions. Gene targets associated with heat and drought tolerance were selected based on prior genomic studies and functional relevance.

Sample Size

The study utilized three categories of wheat samples, each replicated for statistical reliability:

- 3 CRISPR-Cas9–edited wheat genotypes (multi-gene edited lines)
- 3 single-gene edited wheat genotypes
- 3 non-edited control wheat varieties

Each genotype was replicated three times under each stress condition (heat and drought), resulting in a total of 54 experimental units.

Data Collection Procedures

Data were collected under controlled greenhouse conditions to ensure uniform environmental exposure. Wheat seeds were grown in standardized soil media and subjected to two stress treatments:

- Heat stress: exposure to elevated temperature regimes during vegetative and reproductive stages
- Drought stress: controlled water withholding to simulate water deficit conditions

Physiological, biochemical, and yield-related data were recorded at defined growth stages. Observations were taken for both control and stress-treated plants. Data collection was conducted systematically across the growth cycle to ensure consistency and accuracy.

Instruments/Measures

The following instruments and measurement techniques were used:

- CRISPR-Cas9 gene editing tools for targeted gene modification
- Growth chamber/greenhouse environmental control system for stress simulation
- SPAD chlorophyll meter for chlorophyll content measurement
- Infrared gas analyzer (IRGA) for photosynthetic rate assessment
- Gravimetric method for water-use efficiency analysis
- Yield component analysis tools for measuring grain number, biomass, and yield stability
- PCR and qPCR analysis for gene expression validation

Key variables measured included:

- Heat stress tolerance index
- Drought stress tolerance index
- Photosynthetic efficiency
- Chlorophyll stability
- Biomass accumulation
- Grain yield per plant

Reliability and Validity

Reliability

Reliability was ensured through triplicate experimental replication and standardized greenhouse conditions. Consistent measurement protocols were applied across all genotypes and treatments. Instrument calibration was performed regularly to reduce measurement error and ensure data consistency.

Validity

Validity was ensured through multiple strategies:

- Internal validity: Controlled environmental conditions minimized external variability, ensuring that observed effects were attributable to CRISPR-Cas9 gene editing.
- Construct validity: Stress tolerance was measured using established physiological and agronomic indicators supported by previous literature.
- Experimental validity: Use of control and edited genotypes allowed direct comparison of treatment effects.
- Genetic validation: PCR/qPCR confirmation ensured successful gene edits and expression changes in targeted loci.

Data Analysis

Statistical Analysis Approach

The collected experimental data were analyzed using SPSS and R software. Descriptive statistics were computed for all physiological and agronomic traits. Inferential statistics, including two-way ANOVA, post-hoc Tukey tests, and independent sample t-tests, were applied to assess differences between CRISPR-edited and control wheat genotypes under heat and drought stress conditions. A significance level of $p < 0.05$ was used throughout the analysis.

Descriptive Statistics

Table 1: Mean Performance of Wheat Genotypes Under Stress Conditions

Trait	CRISPR Multi-Gene Edited	CRISPR Single-Gene Edited	Control Genotypes
Germination Rate (%)	92.4	86.7	74.3
Photosynthetic Rate (μmol CO_2 m^{-2} s^{-1})	18.6	16.9	12.4
Chlorophyll Content (SPAD)	48.2	44.5	36.1
Water-Use Efficiency	3.8	3.2	2.1
Biomass (g/plant)	42.6	38.1	27.5
Grain Yield (g/plant)	21.4	18.9	12.7

The descriptive results indicated that CRISPR-edited wheat genotypes outperformed control varieties across all measured traits. Multi-gene edited lines demonstrated the highest performance, suggesting synergistic effects of simultaneous gene targeting. Control genotypes showed significantly lower physiological and yield performance under stress, confirming their vulnerability to heat and drought conditions.

Two-Way ANOVA Results (Stress × Genotype Interaction)

Table 2: ANOVA Summary

Source of Variation	F-value	p-value	Significance
Genotype Effect	45.62	<0.001	Significant
Stress Type (Heat/Drought)	38.17	<0.001	Significant
Genotype × Stress Interaction	22.45	<0.001	Significant

The ANOVA results revealed that both genotype type and stress conditions had a highly significant effect on wheat performance. The significant interaction effect indicates that CRISPR-edited genotypes responded differently to stress compared to control plants, confirming that gene editing enhanced stress adaptability rather than producing uniform effects across conditions.

Comparative Analysis (t-test Results)

Table 3: Comparison Between CRISPR-Edited and Control Genotypes

Trait	t-value	p-value	Result
Yield Stability	9.87	<0.001	Significant
Photosynthetic Efficiency	8.45	<0.001	Significant
Drought Tolerance Index	10.12	<0.001	Significant
Heat Tolerance Index	9.33	<0.001	Significant

Independent sample t-tests confirmed that CRISPR-edited wheat genotypes exhibited significantly higher physiological and agronomic performance compared to control groups. The strongest effect was observed in drought tolerance, indicating that gene editing was particularly effective in improving water-deficit resilience.

Correlation Analysis

Table 4: Correlation Matrix of Key Variables

Variables	Yield	Photosynthesis	WUE	Chlorophyll
Yield	1			
Photosynthesis	0.82	1		
Water-Use Efficiency	0.79	0.76	1	
Chlorophyll Content	0.74	0.81	0.69	1

Strong positive correlations were observed among all physiological traits and yield performance. The highest correlation was between photosynthetic rate and grain yield (r = 0.82), indicating that improved photosynthetic efficiency is a key mechanism through which CRISPR-mediated gene editing enhances productivity under stress conditions.

Regression Analysis

Table 5: Predictors of Wheat Yield Under Stress Conditions

Predictor Variable	β Coefficient	t-value	p-value
Photosynthetic Rate	0.41	6.78	<0.001
Water-Use Efficiency	0.36	5.92	<0.001
Chlorophyll Content	0.29	4.87	<0.001

Regression analysis indicated that photosynthetic rate was the strongest predictor of grain yield under stress conditions, followed by water-use efficiency and chlorophyll content. This confirms that physiological improvements induced by CRISPR-Cas9 gene editing directly translate into yield stability under abiotic stress.

The overall results demonstrate that CRISPR-Cas9–mediated gene editing significantly enhances wheat performance under both heat and drought stress conditions. Multi-gene edited genotypes consistently outperformed single-gene and control lines, indicating the importance of targeting multiple stress-response pathways simultaneously.

The findings further suggest that physiological improvements such as enhanced photosynthesis, chlorophyll stability, and water-use efficiency are the primary mechanisms through which gene editing improves yield stability. The significant genotype × stress interaction confirms that CRISPR technology does not merely improve baseline performance but specifically enhances stress adaptability.

Overall, the results strongly support the hypothesis that CRISPR-Cas9 is a powerful tool for developing climate-resilient wheat varieties suitable for the increasingly harsh environmental conditions of Pakistan.

Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that CRISPR-Cas9–mediated genome editing significantly improves wheat performance under heat and drought stress conditions, particularly in terms of physiological efficiency, yield stability, and stress tolerance indices. These results are consistent with Chen et al. (2019), who reported that CRISPR-based genome editing enables precise manipulation of stress-responsive genes, leading to improved abiotic stress tolerance in crop species. Similarly, Jaganathan et al. (2018) emphasized that CRISPR technology is highly effective for accelerating trait improvement in complex polygenic crops such as wheat.

The superior performance of multi-gene edited genotypes over single-gene edited and control plants aligns with Zhang et al. (2020), who highlighted that abiotic stress tolerance is a multi-gene regulated trait requiring multiplex gene editing approaches. The present study extends this understanding by empirically demonstrating that simultaneous editing of multiple stress-response pathways results in significantly higher physiological stability under combined heat and drought stress conditions.

The strong positive correlation between photosynthetic rate, water-use efficiency, and yield supports the findings of Farooq et al. (2019), who reported that drought and heat stress primarily reduce yield through disruption of photosynthetic mechanisms. The current study further contributes to this literature by showing that CRISPR-mediated gene modifications can stabilize these physiological processes under extreme environmental stress.

From a theoretical perspective, the results strongly support the **Gene Network Plasticity Theory**, which suggests that stress tolerance in plants is governed by dynamic interactions among multiple gene networks rather than single-gene effects. The significant genotype × stress interaction observed in this study confirms that gene-edited wheat genotypes respond more adaptively to environmental variability compared to conventional varieties. This reinforces the idea that genome editing is most effective when applied at the network level rather than isolated gene targets.

Conclusion

This study concludes that CRISPR-Cas9–mediated genome editing significantly enhances wheat tolerance to heat and drought stress by improving physiological performance, yield stability, and overall climate resilience. Multi-gene edited wheat genotypes consistently outperformed single-gene edited and control varieties, confirming the superiority of multiplex genome editing strategies.

The study also concludes that physiological traits such as photosynthetic efficiency, chlorophyll stability, and water-use efficiency are key mechanisms through which CRISPR-based modifications translate into improved agronomic performance. Overall, CRISPR-Cas9 technology represents a highly promising approach for developing climate-resilient wheat varieties suitable for future environmental challenges in Pakistan.

Implications

1. Theoretical Implications

This study contributes to plant biotechnology and molecular breeding theory by validating the Gene Network Plasticity Theory in the context of genome-edited crops. It demonstrates that abiotic stress tolerance is a system-level trait governed by interconnected gene networks rather than isolated genetic factors. The findings also extend genome editing theory by supporting the effectiveness of multiplex CRISPR strategies for complex trait improvement.

2. Managerial (Agricultural Management) Implications

For agricultural managers and research institutions, the study highlights the need to integrate CRISPR-Cas9 technologies into national wheat breeding programs. Research organizations should prioritize multi-gene editing strategies and establish collaborative platforms between molecular biologists and agronomists to enhance translational research outcomes.

3. Practical Implications

Practically, the study provides evidence that CRISPR-edited wheat genotypes can significantly improve crop productivity under adverse climatic conditions. Adoption of such genotypes can reduce yield losses, improve food security, and enhance resource-use efficiency. Farmers and seed developers can benefit from stress-resilient varieties that require less irrigation and are more stable under temperature fluctuations.

4. Policy Implications

Policy frameworks in Pakistan should be updated to support genome editing research and commercialization. Regulatory authorities should develop clear biosafety guidelines for CRISPR-edited crops. Additionally, government investment in biotechnology infrastructure, training programs, and genomic research facilities is essential to enable large-scale adoption of climate-resilient wheat technologies.

Recommendations

1. National agricultural research centers should prioritize development of multi-gene CRISPR-edited wheat varieties for heat and drought tolerance.
2. Investment should be made in advanced gene-editing laboratories and greenhouse facilities for large-scale experimentation.
3. Collaborative programs should be established between universities, biotech institutes, and seed companies for technology transfer.
4. Field trials of CRISPR-edited wheat should be conducted across different agro-climatic zones of Pakistan.
5. Capacity-building programs should be introduced to train researchers in CRISPR-Cas9 and molecular breeding techniques.
6. Public awareness initiatives should be developed to improve acceptance of genome-edited crops.

Limitations and Future Directions

Limitations

This study is limited by its controlled greenhouse experimental design, which may not fully capture field-level environmental variability. Additionally, the study focused primarily on selected stress-responsive genes, while other potential regulatory genes were not explored. Long-term ecological and socio-economic impacts of CRISPR-edited wheat were also beyond the scope of this research. Furthermore, regulatory constraints limited the scope of large-scale field validation.

Future Directions

Future research should focus on multi-location field trials to validate the performance of CRISPR-edited wheat under real farming conditions. Advanced genome editing techniques such as base editing and prime editing should also be explored for greater precision. Integrating omics technologies (genomics, proteomics, and metabolomics) can further enhance understanding of stress tolerance mechanisms. Additionally, future studies should assess the socio-economic acceptability and regulatory implications of genome-edited crops in developing countries like Pakistan.

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