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Harnessing Genomic Selection for Enhancing Abiotic Stress Tolerance in Wheat

(Tushadri Singh[1] and *Ashish Sheera[2])
[1]College of Agriculture, GBPUA&T, Pantnagar, Uttarakhand-263145
[2]College of Agriculture, Dholpur, SKN Agriculture University, Jobner, Raj.-328027
*Corresponding Author's email: sheeraashish@gmail.com

Wheat (*Triticum aestivum* L.) is a staple crop worldwide, providing a significant portion of the global population's dietary needs. However, the increasing threat of abiotic stresses, such as drought, heat, and salinity, poses a significant challenge to wheat production. Conventional breeding methods have limitations in efficiently developing stress-tolerant varieties. Genomic selection, a cutting-edge technique, emerges as a promising approach to accelerate the breeding process and enhance abiotic stress tolerance in wheat.

Genomic selection involves predicting the genetic value of individuals based on their entire genomic information. Unlike traditional breeding methods that rely on phenotypic evaluations, genomic selection utilizes high-throughput genotyping technologies to analyze a vast number of genetic markers across the entire genome. This comprehensive approach enables the selection of individuals with desirable traits, such as abiotic stress tolerance, at an early stage, significantly reducing the breeding cycle.

The advent of model-based association, coupled with the widespread availability of molecular markers, has given rise to the concept of genomic selection—a method employed to appraise the breeding value of genotypes. This innovative technique aims to overcome the limitations inherent in map-based genetic analyses, which often pinpoint a limited number of Quantitative Trait Loci (QTLs) to elucidate variations in targeted traits. The concrete significance lies in the assessment of QTL effects and linkage disequilibrium based on the genetic relatedness and divergence within the population under scrutiny.

Populations showcasing greater allelic variation in targeted traits offer a more precise evaluation of QTL effects compared to closely related populations. Linkage disequilibrium tends to be overemphasized in closely related, intermating individuals and diminishes with subsequent meiotic events. Genomic selection transforms marker-assisted selection by predicting genomic breeding values with the assistance of markers. A model, established and evaluated using genotypic and phenotypic data from the study population, is then employed to assess the phenotypic variation of the sample population based solely on their genetic composition. This approach promises to enhance genetic gain when compared to both QTL and phenotype-based selection methodologies.

Steps of Genomic Selection for Abiotic Stress Tolerance:

1. Genotyping: High-throughput genotyping technologies, such as Single Nucleotide Polymorphism (SNP) arrays, are employed to analyze the genetic makeup of a large number of plants efficiently.
2. Phenotyping: Accurate phenotypic data related to abiotic stress responses are collected from controlled environments. This data is crucial for training the predictive models.

3. Training Predictive Models: Statistical models, such as genomic best linear unbiased prediction (GBLUP) and machine learning algorithms, are trained using the genotypic and phenotypic data. These models learn the genetic patterns associated with stress tolerance.
4. Selection: The trained models are then used to predict the stress tolerance of new individuals based solely on their genomic information. Breeders can select plants with the desired traits for further breeding.

Advantages of Genomic Selection for Abiotic Stress Tolerance:

1. Early Selection: Genomic selection allows breeders to identify and select plants with superior stress tolerance at the seedling stage, enabling early interventions and reducing the time required for phenotypic evaluations.
2. Increased Precision: By considering the entire genomic information, genomic selection provides a more accurate prediction of an individual's potential stress tolerance. This precision enhances the likelihood of success in developing stress-resistant wheat varieties.
3. Multi-Trait Selection: Genomic selection facilitates the simultaneous improvement of multiple traits. This is crucial for developing holistic stress-tolerant varieties that can withstand various environmental challenges.
4. Reduced Environmental Influence: Traditional breeding relies on field trials, which are susceptible to environmental variations. Genomic selection minimizes the impact of environmental factors, ensuring a more reliable evaluation of stress tolerance.

Challenges and Future Prospects

Despite the numerous advantages, challenges such as the need for extensive genotypic and phenotypic data, computational complexities, and the requirement for advanced infrastructure still exist. However, ongoing advancements in technology and increased collaboration between genomics and wheat breeding communities are addressing these challenges.

In conclusion, genomic selection holds immense potential for revolutionizing wheat breeding for abiotic stress tolerance. As the global population continues to grow, ensuring food security in the face of changing climates becomes increasingly critical. Genomic selection provides a powerful tool to expedite the development of stress-resistant wheat varieties, contributing to sustainable agriculture and global food security.

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