The cultivation of soybean (Glycine max) holds a crucial position in global agriculture, making substantial contributions to both the food and industrial sectors. Positioned as the foremost legume globally, soy serves dual roles as a provider of protein and vegetable oil (Hudson et al., 2022). Enhancing soybean production nationwide is within reach by concurrently elevating productivity and expanding cultivation areas (Sharma et al., 2022). Despite its high importance, soybean crops are susceptible to various diseases that can negatively impact both yield and quality. In this context, the percent disease index (PDI) serves as a valuable metric for quantifying Rhizoctonia aerial blight disease severity and assessing the impact of various factors on soybean health. The disease is characterized by the existence of light to dark brown spots, along with superficial mycelium resembling a web and sclerotia on the affected tissue (Verma and Thapliyal, 1976).

The Tarai region of Uttarakhand, known for its diverse agroclimatic conditions, stands as a significant soybean cultivation area. The region’s distinctive climate and topography create an intriguing and challenging environment for soybean cultivation, with temperature, humidity, and precipitation acting as pivotal factors influencing disease dynamics. This research endeavours to address this gap by conducting a thorough investigation into the relationship between Rhizoctonia aerial blight disease’s PDI and weather variables in soybean crops within the Tarai region of Uttarakhand. The primary objectives encompass the development and rigorous testing of diverse statistical models that incorporate various weather parameters to accurately predict PDI.

A field trial was conducted during the kharif season of 2021-22 at the Norman E. Borlaug Crop Research Centre, G.B. Pant University of Agriculture and Technology, Pantnagar-263145, Uttarakhand. Sixteen soybean cultivars, namely JS-7244, JS-7546, JS-7105, JS-72-220, PK-262, PK-472, MACS-52, JS-93-05, Pb-1, Bragg, Monetta, KHSb-2, NRC-7, VLS-58, JS-335 and Shivalik, were employed for the study. All phenological parameters and disease progression were systematically recorded at fixed interval on weekly basis. Daily weather data were collected from agrometeorological observatory. The statistical package for the social sciences (SPSS) was employed for statistical analysis. The multiple regression equations were developed between PDI and weather parameters.

The regression equations, thus developed, are presented in Table 1. The coefficient of determination (R²) ranged from 0.56 to 0.748. The highest (R²=0.748) was observed for the cultivar PK-472 (0.748), followed by VLS-58 (0.715) and NRC (0.71), indicating well-fitted equations for predicting PDI. Conversely, the lowest coefficient of determination was found for cultivar JS-7244 (0.562). The results indicated that these weather variables played a pivotal role in disease prevalence and spread, collectively accounting for 56 to 75% of the variability in Rhizoctonia aerial blight disease index. Throughout the crop season, the primary contributors to RAB development across all cultivars in constructing the regression model were identified as maximum temperature (>34 ºC), morning relative humidity (93%), rainfall (76.2 mm) and sunshine hours.

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The present study’s findings align with Fagodiya et al., (2022), who observed varying severity of Alternaria leaf spot disease influenced by meteorological conditions during the kharif seasons of 2018 and 2019. The study revealed an increase in percent disease index after the disease onset, with early sown crops exhibiting higher
severity. Similar investigations were conducted by Verma et al., (2023) on black pepper, indicating that meteorological conditions significantly affected the occurrence of anthracnose disease. Key weather variables, such as rainfall, minimum temperature, rainy days and morning relative humidity, were identified as statistically significant factors influencing disease occurrence and spread. In contrast, maximum temperature, evening relative humidity and bright sunshine hours showed no impact on disease occurrence. Amrate et al., (2021) have also reported that maximum temperature, rainfall and relative humidity played a significant role in initiation and development of aerial blight disease in soybean. Analysing the positive or negative contributions of the studied meteorological factors to PDI increase, this study corroborates findings by Rini et al., (2017) regarding the inverse relationship between maximum temperature and PDI.

This study has demonstrated the utility of multiple regression models in assessing the relationship between weather variables and Rhizoctonia aerial blight (RAB) progression in sixteen soybean cultivars. The coefficient of determination (R²) revealed significant variations in disease development among the cultivars, indicating a well-fitted equation for predicting Percentage Disease Index (PDI). Overall, the results contribute valuable insights into understanding and predicting RAB progression, aiding in the development of targeted strategies for disease management in soybean cultivation.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The authors would like to thank Department of Agrometeorology and Department of Plant Pathology for conducting this innovative research.

Funding: No funding was involved.

Conflict of Interests: The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest related to this article.

Data availability: To be provided on request.

Authors contribution: M. Nainwal: Investigation, Formal analysis, Writing-original draft, Conceptualization, Methodology; A. Satpathi: Writing-review and editing; R. Ranjan: Visualization and editing; A. S. Nain: Supervision, Editing.

Authors certificate: The author’s certificate of originality duly signed by all authors is submitted with the manuscript.

Disclaimer: The contents, opinions, and views expressed in the research article published in the Journal of Agrometeorology are the views of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the organizations they belong to.

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