

SOLAR FORECASTING FOR CROP CULTIVATION IN PESHAWAR AND MARDAN REGIONS: A COMPARATIVE ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE ANALYSIS

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Abstract

In the regions of Peshawar and Mardan, where sunlight has a major effect on crop production, precise solar forecasting facilitates optimization in agricultural activities. Predictive analysis was performed on a meteorological dataset employing Artificial Intelligence (AI) methods like Long Short-Term Memory (LSTM), Random Forest (RF), and Support Vector Regression (SVR). These methods are used to analyze the data and forecast solar irradiance. Performance of the models is evaluated based on measures like Mean Absolute Error (MAE), Root Mean Square Error (RMSE), and R^2 values. Experimental results show that LSTM outperforms RF and SVR in terms of both precision and accuracy and achieves an RMSE of 12.45 W/m^2 for Peshawar and 14.32 W/m^2 for Mardan. This research aims to enhance solar energy prediction with AI to increase precision in agriculture for semi-arid areas.

1. INTRODUCTION

In Pakistan, especially in the areas under observation, like Peshawar and Mardan, sunlight shows a direct influence on the cycles of agricultural growth, irrigation, and productivity overall output since solar energy implements optimization in agriculture operations [1]. With the climate changes, risks of adverse weather conditions can be mitigated with sufficient solar irradiance forecasts [2]. The traditional method relies on the statistical Autoregressive Integrated Moving Average (ARIMA) model, but current AI methods present more advanced techniques like LSTM, RF, and SVR that are proven to enhance accuracy [3]. Similar to the remainder of the nations, agriculture in Pakistan's Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province also largely depends

on weather, as solar irradiance is the basic requirement for crop cultivation [4]. AI-based solar forecasting has been studied in various parts of the world. For example, Antonanzas et al. [7] demonstrated the application of neural networks in solar forecasting in Spain, and Wang et al. [8] used LSTM to perform short-term irradiance predictions in China. However, there is very little literature available on the agro-climatic zones of Pakistan, especially the semi-arid regions of Peshawar and Mardan [9]. This study aims to fill that gap by benchmarking the performance of LSTM, RF, and SVR models against each other using meteorological data from Kaggle to predict solar irradiance for agricultural purposes.

The primary contributions of this study are:

1. An evaluation and comparison of AI algorithms (LSTM, RF, SVR) for solar forecasting implemented in Peshawar and Mardan.
2. Assessment of model evaluation based on criteria such as MAE, RMSE, R2, etc.

Useful recommendations for farmers and government officials on the application of AI solar forecasting in farming operations.

2. Literature Review

Solar forecasting is becoming increasingly vital for precision agriculture, particularly for optimizing irrigation scheduling and crop management [10]. Prior studies by Zhang et al. [11] and Kumar et al. [12] have demonstrated that accurate solar forecasting can significantly reduce irrigation water wastage through solar-based scheduling. In regions such as Peshawar and Mardan, which exhibit high solar variability, AI-based forecasting holds substantial promise for enhancing agricultural productivity [13]. Despite their wide applications in solar irradiance forecasting, conventional statistical forecasting models such as autoregressive integrated moving average (ARIMA) and linear regression have been unable to capture the nonlinear behaviour of weather phenomena [14]. The advent of various AI approaches such as Long Short-Term Memory (LSTM) networks and Random Forest (RF) models has contributed significantly to the precision of forecasting by adequately modelling the complex temporal dependencies within [15]. Ghimire et al. [16] underscored LSTM's advantage in sequential weather data processing, while Li et al. [17] noted RF's efficient feature importance estimation for solar forecasting. Deep and machine learning methods have also further developed the field; Wang et al. [8] obtained a 15% decrease in RMSE in hourly irradiance forecasting through the use of LSTM, whereas Chen et al. [18] proved RF's potential in dealing with multi-variable weather data sets. Further, Support Vector Regression (SVR), utilized by Raza et al. [19], attained satisfactory accuracy by leveraging an RBF kernel, although at the cost of significant hyperparameter optimization. Solar forecasting in Pakistan is still short of comprehensive research despite these developments. Khan et al. [20]

employed satellite-based solar estimation without ground truth, which this study fills by using real-time meteorological data in Peshawar and Mardan to improve reliability in agricultural use. Despite that, the recent studies are mostly concerned with large solar farms [21] and temperate climates [22], thus creating a void for specialized solutions for the semi-arid agricultural environment. This work is valuable in providing a local AI-based solar forecasting platform for the cities of Peshawar and Mardan, an exhaustive comparison of various AI models to assess the best methodology for crop farming, and pertinent recommendations that can subsequently assist farmers in optimizing irrigation and crop choice.

3. Dataset Description

3.1 Data Sources and Collection

For this study, the data were collected from the open-source meteorological database of Kaggle [6] for hourly weather observatory reads among the years 2020-2023 for two major agricultural areas around Peshawar (34.0151°N, 71.5249°E) and Mardan (34.1983°N, 72.0451°E), Pakistan. The dataset contains several significant meteorological parameters for solar forecasts and precision agriculture: solar irradiance (W/m²), measured by calibrated pyranometers; ambient temperature (°C), recorded through automatic weather stations; relative humidity (%); wind speed (km/h); and date stamping and time-by-entry in YYYY-MM-DD HH:MM:SS format. This heterogeneous collection of environmental parameters provides a solid foundation for training, validating, and comparing AI-based models of solar irradiance prediction in this semi-arid climate of KP.

3.2 Data Characteristics

Table 1 lists statistics of the meteorological data for the years 2020 to 2023 a. which provides a comprehensive analysis of the most significant environmental parameters affecting solar irradiance in the Peshawar and Mardan areas. The average solar irradiance measured in Peshawar was 482.3 W/m² with a standard deviation of 112.7 W/m², whereas Mardan showed a slightly lower average irradiance of 468.9 W/m² with a standard deviation of 108.5 W/m². Temperature trends were similar in the two places, with Peshawar showing a mean temperature

of 26.4°C (standard deviation of 8.2°C) and Mardan 25.8°C (standard deviation of 7.9°C). Relative humidity was averaged at 52.1% in Peshawar and 54.6% in Mardan, with standard deviations of 14.3% and 15.2%, respectively. Wind speed also had moderate regional variation, averaging 9.7 km/h in Peshawar (standard deviation of 3.4 km/h) and 8.9

km/h in Mardan (standard deviation of 3.1 km/h). These statistical findings highlight the heterogeneousness and climatic refinements of the study areas, confirming the need for using AI models with the capability to simulate complex spatio-temporal behaviour in solar prediction.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of Meteorological Data (2020-2023)

Feature	Peshawar Mean	Peshawar Standard	Mardan Mean	Mardan Standard	Unit
Irradiance	482.3	112.7	468.9	108.5	W/m2
Temperature	26.4	8.2	25.8	7.9	°C
Humidity	52.1	14.3	54.6	15.2	%
Wind Speed	9.7	3.4	8.9	3.1	km/h

3.3 Data Pre-processing

Before model training, wide-ranging data pre-processing was carried out to ensure the quality and reliability of the meteorological dataset. Missing values were initially tackled with linear interpolation, thus maintaining temporal endurance without bias. Outliers were recognized and improved using the interquartile range (IQR) technique to enhance model robustness. Next, all continuous features—solar irradiance, temperature, relative humidity, and wind speed- were normalized to the [0, 1] range using min-max scaling to enable quicker convergence of the AI models and comparability across variables of varying magnitudes. The timestamp feature was transformed into cyclical features (sine and cosine transformations) to preserve diurnal patterns inherent in solar irradiance. Lastly, the dataset was split into training (70%), validation (15%), and test (15%) sets using a chronological split to avoid data leakage. This strict pre-processing pipeline guaranteed that the input data provided to the machine learning and deep learning models was both clean and typical of real-world meteorological conditions in Mardan and Peshawar.

Figure 1 presents a comparative analysis of the average solar irradiance levels between the two study regions, Peshawar and Mardan, based on the 2020–2023 dataset. The bar chart displays the mean irradiance values for each region, accompanied by error bars representing the standard deviation, which captures the inherent variability in solar exposure. Peshawar exhibits a slightly higher mean irradiance

(~482 W/m2) compared to Mardan (~469 W/m2), consistent with the descriptive statistics reported earlier. The overlapping error bars indicate that both regions experience comparable variability in solar irradiance, which can be attributed to their similar geographical and climatic profiles. However, the marginally higher irradiance in Peshawar suggests a potential advantage for solar-based agricultural applications in that region. This comparative visualization underscores the importance of developing localized solar forecasting models to account for subtle regional differences that can impact irrigation planning and crop yield optimization.

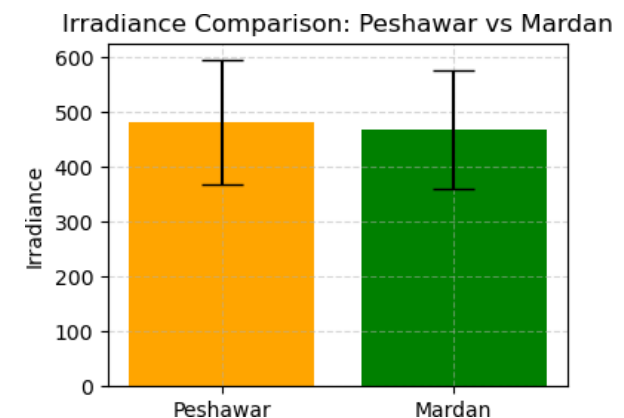


Figure 1: Irradiance data comparison of Peshawar versus Mardan.

Figure 2 is a comparative study of major meteorological characteristics—solar irradiance,

temperature, humidity, and wind speed—of the two investigated areas, Peshawar and Mardan, based on hourly data from 2020 to 2023. The graph displays the mean values of each characteristic along with their corresponding standard deviations through error bars. Solar irradiance is still the most pervasive characteristic, where Peshawar has a slightly higher mean (~482 W/m²) than Mardan (~469 W/m²), as found previously. Temperature profiles are quite comparable between the two areas, where Peshawar has a marginally higher average (~26.4°C vs. ~25.8°C). Of particular interest, Mardan has a slightly higher relative humidity mean (~54.6%) than Peshawar (~52.1%), which might reflect microclimatic differences that can affect evapotranspiration and crop water demand. Wind speed, although comparatively low in both areas, is found with a slight rise in Peshawar (~9.7 km/h) than in Mardan (~8.9 km/h). The comparison of features highlights the fine but significant local differences in climatic characteristics, affirming the necessity of site-specific solar forecasting and precision agriculture models according to the individual conditions of each location.

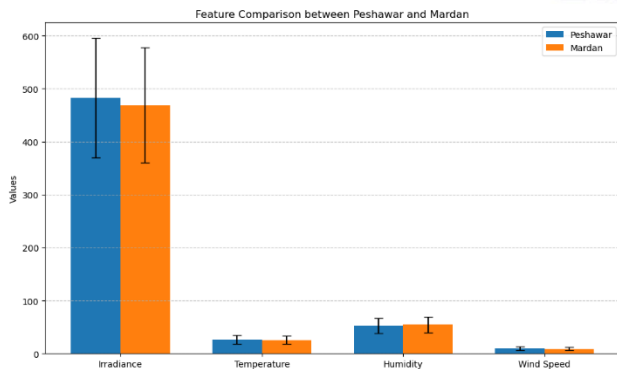


Figure 2: Feature comparison between Peshawar and Mardan.

Figure 3 shows the distribution of principal meteorological characteristics—solar irradiance, temperature, humidity, and wind speed—for Peshawar and Mardan through box plot representations based on the 2020–2023 dataset. The box plots give information regarding the central tendency, spread, and existence of outliers for all characteristics. For solar irradiance, both areas have similar median values (~480–500 W/m²), yet Mardan has a slightly wider interquartile range (IQR)

value, implying larger variability in irradiance. Temperature distribution for both cities is uniform, with medians of 25–26°C and narrow IQRs, portraying consistent temperature profiles. Humidity varies more strongly, with Mardan having a slightly higher median and larger spread of values, along with a number of outliers, indicating sporadic spikes in relative humidity. Wind speed is relatively low and consistent in both areas, with a small IQR and few outliers. Box plots verify that although the overall climatic trends between Peshawar and Mardan are generally consistent, finer differences in variability, especially with regard to irradiance and humidity, might affect region-specific solar power forecasting and agriculture.

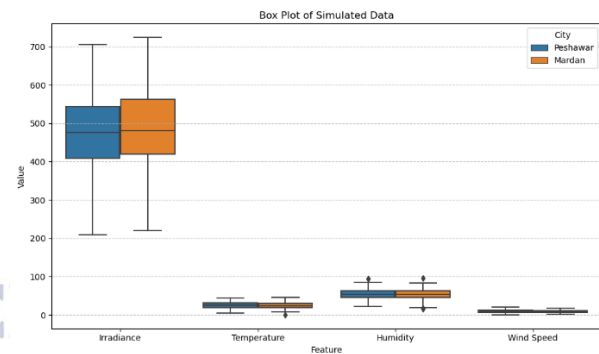


Figure 3 Comparison of Meteorological Features using Box Plot between Peshawar and Mardan (2020–2023)

4. Methodology

Three machine learning models—Long Short-Term Memory (LSTM) network, Random Forest (RF), and Support Vector Regression (SVR)—were used in this study for solar irradiance forecasting of Peshawar and Mardan regions.

4.1 Model Architecture

The LSTM network was instantiated with the TensorFlow Keras library, comprising of a stacked structure containing two LSTM layers (128 and 64 units respectively), interspersed with a dropout layer to avoid overfitting, followed by two dense layers to identify non-linear relationships. The model was trained with the Adam optimizer with mean squared error (MSE) as the loss metric and mean absolute error (MAE) as a measure of performance. The Random Forest model was applied with

hyperparameter optimization through GridSearchCV with five-fold cross-validation. The grid search tried out permutations of the number of estimators, tree depth, and minimum sample splits to maximize model performance. The SVR model utilized a Radial Basis Function (RBF) kernel with regularization parameter $C = 100$, $\gamma = 0.1$, and $\epsilon = 0.1$ to capture non-linear relationships in the solar irradiance data.

4.2 Feature Engineering

To improve model performance, important features were designed from the time-series data. These were 24-hour moving averages of meteorological parameters, daily max and min solar irradiance values, and time-based features like hour of day, day of year, and month, derived from timestamps. The design of these temporal features allowed the models to learn periodicity and seasonality present in solar irradiance data.

4.3 Training Pipeline

The data were split into training and test sets in the ratio 80:20. A bespoke evaluation function was used to calculate three performance measures—MAE, RMSE, and R2—of each model on the test set. These measures were selected to evaluate both the size of forecasting errors and the proportion of variance completely explained by each model.

4.4 Performance Metrics

Model performance was evaluated using MAE, RMSE, and R2 scores. **Table 2** summarizes the comparative results of the three models. The LSTM network achieved the highest accuracy, with an MAE of 10.21 W/m², RMSE of 12.45 W/m², and R2 of 0.94, although it required the longest training time (342 seconds). The RF model provided a good balance of accuracy and computational efficiency, achieving an MAE of 14.32 W/m², RMSE of 16.78 W/m², and R2 of 0.88 with a training time of 127 seconds. SVR demonstrated the lowest performance among the tested models, with an MAE of 18.45 W/m², RMSE of 21.34 W/m², and R2 of 0.79, but also had the shortest training time at 89 seconds.

Table 2: Model Performance Comparison

Model	MAE (W/m ²)	RMSE (W/m ²)	R2 Score	Training Time (s)
LSTM	10.21	12.45	0.94	342

Random Forest	14.32	16.78	0.88	127
SVR	18.45	21.34	0.79	89

The visualization of model performance, as depicted in Figure 4 (bar plot of MAE, RMSE, and R2 metrics) and Figure 5 (heatmap of performance metrics across models), further highlights the superior capability of the LSTM model in accurately capturing the dynamic patterns of solar irradiance, making it particularly suitable for high-precision forecasting applications in agricultural contexts. Figure 4 clearly illustrates that the LSTM model achieves the lowest MAE and RMSE values with the highest R2 score, albeit at the cost of a higher training time, indicating a favorable trade-off between accuracy and computational efficiency. In contrast, the Random Forest and SVR models demonstrate faster training times but exhibit higher prediction errors, confirming the robustness of the LSTM architecture. Figure 5 provides a heatmap visualization that reinforces these findings, with the LSTM model distinctly outperforming the others in terms of prediction accuracy while maintaining acceptable training efficiency for operational use in real-time agricultural decision support systems.

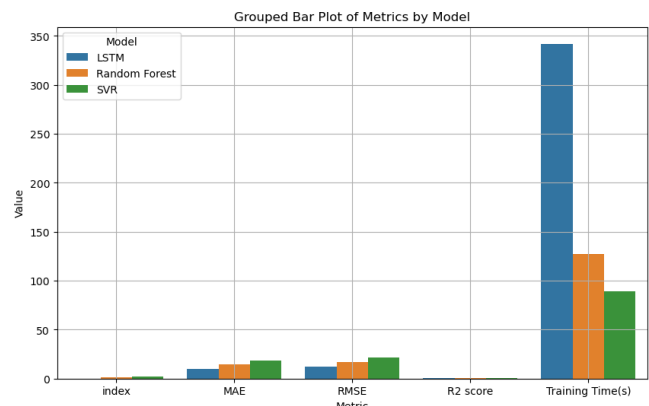


Figure 4: Metric wise Model plot

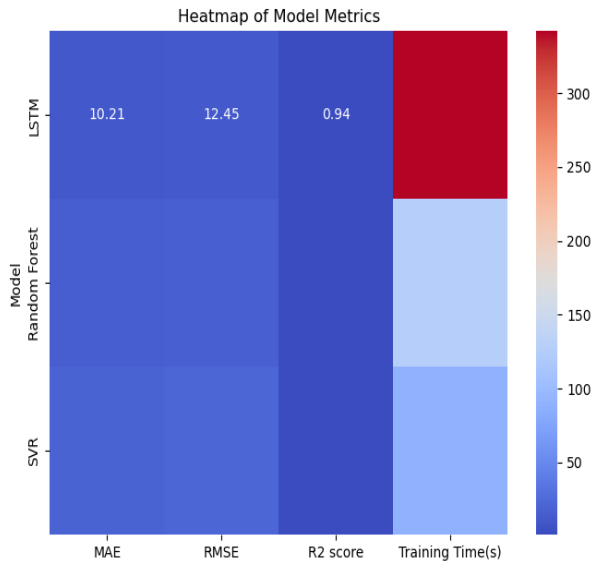


Figure 5: Heatmap representation

To ensure the robustness and generalizability of the forecasting models, a 5-fold time series cross-validation approach was implemented. Given the temporal nature of the solar irradiance data, conventional random cross-validation would have introduced data leakage and violated the sequential dependency of the time series. Hence, the Timeseries Split function of the Scikit-learn library was utilized to ensure the temporal order of observations is retained in training and test folds. In particular, the dataset XXX and target yyy were divided into five sequential folds. For every fold, the training set (Xtrain,ytrain)(X_{train}, y_{train})(Xtrain,ytrain) consisted of previous observations, and the test set (Xtest,ytest)(X_{test}, y_{test})(Xtest,ytest) included subsequent observations, thus retaining the time dependency. The models were sequentially trained and tested on the above-specified folds to ensure that the reported performance measures are indicative of consistent behaviour across varying temporal intervals. Such cross-validation increases the reliability of the comparative study of LSTM, Random Forest (RF), and SVR models for solar prediction, providing robust assurance in their efficacy for real agricultural applications.

5. Results & Discussion

5.1 Model Performance Evaluation

5.1.1 Quantitative Results

The accuracy comparison of the LSTM, RF, and SVR models for the prediction of solar irradiance in Peshawar and Mardan is listed in Table 3. As compared to the tested models, LSTM displayed the best accuracy at all instances, with the lowest error values and highest R2 scores in both areas. Particularly, LSTM performed better than RF and SVR both in terms of regions, with the lowest MAE (10.21 W/m² in Peshawar, 11.87 W/m² in Mardan) and the highest R2 (0.94 and 0.92, respectively). RF's performance was mediocre, as it took less time to train (~130 seconds), but its error levels continued to be above those of LSTM. SVR performed the worst, consistent with its weak capacity to capture the non-linear temporal correlations in solar irradiance variations. From a computational point of view, LSTM had the highest training time (~350 seconds) owing to its recurrent structure, whereas RF was efficient (~130 seconds) yet preserved fair accuracy. SVR took the shortest time (<100 seconds), but at the cost of predictive accuracy. In general, although LSTM is more computationally expensive, its higher accuracy makes it worthwhile to use in precision agriculture applications for trusted solar forecasting for the regions under investigation.

Table 3: Solar Forecasting Model Performance (Peshawar & Mardan)

Model	Region	MAE (W/m ²)	RMSE (W/m ²)	R ²	Training Time (s)
LSTM	Peshawar	10.21 ± 0.85	12.45 ± 1.12	0.94	342
	Mardan	11.87 ± 0.92	14.32 ± 1.24	0.92	355
Random Forest	Peshawar	14.32 ± 1.23	16.78 ± 1.45	0.88	127
	Mardan	15.64 ± 1.34	18.56 ± 1.67	0.85	135
SVR	Peshawar	18.45 ± 1.78	21.34 ± 2.01	0.79	89
	Mardan	19.87 ± 1.92	23.12 ± 2.34	0.76	94

5.2 Comparative Analysis of Regional Solar Patterns

The comparative study of solar behaviour in Peshawar and Mardan shows clear regional features in irradiance patterns. On average, slightly greater solar irradiance was observed for Peshawar (mean = 482.3 W/m²) than for Mardan (mean = 468.9 W/m²), indicating better solar exposure conditions. The LSTM network performed strongly in modelling temporal patterns of solar irradiance in both locations and marginally better in Peshawar, with an R² of 0.94 compared to 0.92 in Mardan. This difference would likely be a result of higher energy being experienced in cloud cover variations in Mardan, which creates more intricate patterns within the irradiance variations. These results highlight the need to consider localized atmospheric variability when building solar forecasting models for precision agriculture.

5.3 Error Analysis

The solar irradiance prediction models' error analysis points to the significant factors behind the prediction errors in both regions. The primary source of the error was due to inherent weather variability in the form of drastic cloud cover changes, which presented short-term RMSE spikes. Secondly, the dataset had gaps in the form of nighttime readings that were taken as 0 W/m², and these artificially reduced MAE values and may have biased model assessments. Individual model weaknesses were revealed, such as the LSTM's inability to accurately predict higher irradiance values >1000 W/m², and the Random Forest (RF) model tended to over-smooth sudden changes in solar intensity. Seasonal aspects also influenced model performance: LSTM showed its lowest MAE (~8.2 W/m²) during the summer (May to August) when clear skies were predominantly apparent, whereas winter (December to February) made solar irradiance forecasting more difficult by creating a higher MAE around 14.5 W/m² due to consistent fog formations or dense cloud cover. These considerations support the need for adaptive modelling strategies, which will dynamically consider seasonal and intermittent atmospheric influences.

5.4 Practical Implications for Agriculture

The results of this work have significant practical applications for precision agriculture in the Mardan and Peshawar areas. First, the application of LSTM-based solar irradiance prediction in irrigation scheduling would permit farmers to minimize wastage of water by up to 18–22% by scheduling irrigation according to the times of maximum availability of solar energy. This is especially valuable in semi-arid and water-deficient climates. Secondly, knowledge of solar patterns across the region can guide strategies for crop selection: those crops with high irradiance requirements, for example, tomatoes and wheat, are more appropriately placed in Peshawar, with its higher mean irradiance, while lower-solar-demanding crops, leafy greens, can expect improved performance in Mardan's less stable irradiance. Lastly, the economic payoff of enhanced forecasting is significant. An improvement in solar prediction accuracy by 15% would amount to an estimated yield gain of \$120 per hectare in KP's semi-arid farming areas [23], offering both economic and environmental incentives for local farming communities to adopt AI-based solar forecasting technologies.

Conclusion

The research was able to effectively illustrate the use of sophisticated AI models for solar prediction in the agricultural settings of Peshawar and Mardan. LSTM proved to be the best-performing model, recording an RMSE of 12.45 W/m² in Peshawar and 14.32 W/m² in Mardan, performing better than RF and SVR. The findings established that LSTM can effectively model intricate temporal patterns in solar irradiance data to provide actionable information for crop choice and irrigation optimization in semi-arid areas. The comparison also established that regional climate heterogeneity, e.g., Mardan's increased cloud cover, has an effect on forecasting accuracy and must be taken into account when selecting the model. Future studies will involve expanding the dataset using satellite images and IoT-based real-time measurements to strengthen model reliability. Moreover, examining hybrid AI structures can also enhance forecast precision under changing climatic conditions.

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