



Cutting through the smog

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Cutting through the smog-Practical interventions exist to tackle the issue of stubble burning

- Incidents of stubble burning — following the harvest of paddy crop in Punjab and Haryana — cannot be averted by imposing fines, or giving notice or giving farmers capital subsidy.
- Instead, the issue requires long-term vision and strategic policy interventions.
- Air pollution is a worry especially in north India.
- Stubble burning is said to be a key factor behind the formation of a dense cover of smog in this part of India though its contribution is less than 20%.
- Farmers are held responsible for the crisis but what is at fault are the flawed and short-sighted policies of the Central and State governments.

Policy of rotation

- In the 1960s, wheat-paddy crop rotation was encouraged in Punjab and Haryana to make India self-sufficient in foodgrain production.
- Large public investments in irrigation and adoption of high yielding varieties under the Green Revolution helped achieve the goal and make the nation food secure.
- However, the negative externalities in terms of land degradation, adverse soil health due to overuse of fertilizers and pesticides, and plummeting water tables have surfaced.
- The increase has undisputedly been at the cost of the area under maize, cotton, oilseeds and sugarcane.
- The policy of minimum support price for crops, in tandem with their assured procurement and input subsidy, have left farmers with no option but to follow this rotation.
- One possibility to curtail the practice is to ensure that the government encourages crop diversification towards less water-intensive crops by extending price incentives and better marketing facilities.

- The policy of a 'price deficiency system' — as initiated in Haryana and Madhya Pradesh — should be adopted to strengthen the production and marketing of alternative crops.
- Another option is to replicate the Telangana model of providing farmers an investment support of Rs.8,000 per acre each year and withdraw price-based support.
- Punjab faces another serious problem: labour shortage.
- Paucity of labour for various farm operations is substituted by machines for which the government extends financial support.

A road map

- A feasible remedy could lie in the setting up of custom hiring centres or inviting companies to make investments for rental purposes.
- If the state provides an app-based support system, to rent out tractors and farm implements and earn additional income — there are examples of this in Nigeria and also in Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat, Uttar Pradesh and Bihar — it would be akin to the 'Uberisation of agriculture'.
- It would avoid stubble burning and at the same time make farming more mechanised, cost effective and a source of employment.
- Another far-sighted approach could be in effective use of paddy straw.
- Farmers, who have already been sensitised to refrain from burning residue, should be given options such as biomass generation.
- Farmers can also be incentivised to sell the residual for additional income.
- The residual has uses, such as in paper, cardboard and packing material making and also hydroseeding (defiberised rice straw can be used in hydroseeding for erosion control).

