

CLIMATE ON THE FARM

Relevant for: Environment | Topic: Environmental Degradation - GHGs, Ozone Depletion and Climate Change

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A report released on Thursday by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has concluded that better management of the world's farms and forests is necessary to tackle climate change. Land use has always been part of conversations on climate change and activities like afforestation have held an important place in the fight against global warming. But the discourse on combating global warming has given more thrust to curbing vehicular and industrial emissions. The IPCC report warns that clean energy, clean transport and reduction emissions alone will not cut global emissions enough to avoid dangerous warming beyond 2 degrees Celsius. It points out that the global food system is responsible for 21 to 37 per cent of the world's GHG emissions.

About a quarter of the Earth's ice-free land area is subjected to what the report describes as "human-induced degradation". Rapid agricultural expansion has led to destruction of forests, wetlands and grasslands and other ecosystems. Soil erosion from agricultural fields, the report estimates, is 10 to 100 times higher than the soil formation rate. This has created spinoff effects. "When land is degraded, it becomes less productive, restricting what can be grown and reducing the soil's ability to absorb carbon. This exacerbates climate change, while climate change in turn exacerbates land degradation," says the report. Moreover, agriculture and allied activities like cattle rearing are major sources of methane and nitrous oxide, far more dangerous GHGs than carbon dioxide.

The report is expected to be a key scientific input into forthcoming climate negotiations, such as the Conference of the Parties of the UN Convention to Combat Desertification in Delhi in September and the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change Conference (COP25) in Santiago, Chile, in December. If recent developments are any indicator, the report could spur moves to pressure developing countries like India to ramp up their global warming mitigation targets. This week the UN special envoy on climate change, Luis Alfonso de Alba, reportedly expressed the hope that India will take up enhanced climate commitment, including in areas such as agriculture. But the country, which seems well on course to meeting its Paris Climate Pact targets, should be careful about taking up commitments that hobble its agriculture sector. However, India — and other countries — could do well to pay heed to the IPCC report's recommendations on curbing land degradation and soil erosion by improving knowledge systems.

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