

# SAFEGUARDING THE DELTA: ON T.N.'S PROTECTED SPECIAL AGRICULTURE ZONE

Relevant for: Indian Economy | Topic: Agriculture Issues and related constraints

By announcing that the Cauvery delta region, Tamil Nadu's rice bowl comprising eight districts, [will be declared as 'Protected Special Agricultural Zone'](#) (PSAZ), State Chief Minister Edappadi K. Palaniswami has recognised farmer concerns about hydrocarbon exploration and accorded primacy to food security. In political messaging, he also sought to deflect the perception that the AIADMK government, after Jayalalithaa's death, is subservient to the BJP-led central government and is complicit in allowing "anti-people" projects. His decision comes weeks after he protested the Centre's unilateral amendment of the Environment Impact Assessment Notification 2006, [exempting prior environmental clearance and public consultations for oil and gas exploration](#). The delta, which produces 33 lakh tonnes of grains in 28 lakh acres, has seen multiple protests for a decade over methane, hydrocarbon, oil and natural gas projects, which required acquisition of fertile lands and well drilling — proposals which triggered fears of groundwater contamination. Neduvasal in Pudukottai and Kadiramangalam in Thanjavur have been the nerve centres of these resolute protests, led by agriculturists and backed by mainstream political parties. In July 2013, in response to sustained protests, then Chief Minister Jayalalithaa ordered suspension on coalbed methane exploration and production in Thanjavur and Tiruvarur and followed it up with a ban in 2015. But in 2017, the Centre signed contracts for hydrocarbon extraction from 31 areas of discovered small fields including from Neduvasal. Two years later it allowed Vedanta Limited to conduct tests for 274 hydrocarbon wells in Tamil Nadu and Puducherry.

Mr. Palaniswami has rightly sensed that the farmers' emotive and intense opposition can be ignored only at a political cost. Agricultural scientists such as M.S. Swaminathan have for long mooted such zones similar to special economic zones; Uttarakhand and Kerala have them. Tamil Nadu now has to enact legislation to protect a vast region, largely in the coastal area, from industries that would affect farming. The State has its challenges. In 2017, a government notification delineated 45 villages covering about 23,000 hectares in Cuddalore and Nagapattinam districts in the delta, as a Petroleum, Chemical and Petrochemical Investment Region, with an eye on over 90,000 crore in investments. The proposed PSAZ raises a question mark on this ambitious scheme. The government may have to brave central pressure and litigation from companies which pumped in money for exploration. The latest decision may have implications for the State's investment climate, what with the closure of the Sterlite Copper plant still fresh in memory. But the intent to prioritise farmer interests and food security is beyond reproach.

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