

Clearing the air

Earlier this week, the National Green Tribunal (NGT) pulled up the Punjab government for not doing enough to end stubble burning, a major cause of pollution in Delhi and its neighbourhood. The issue has come to the fore again since the monsoon has retreated and farmers have begun to ready their fields for sowing. Removing the crop stubble marks the beginning of the new farm cycle, and evidence suggests that very few farmers are willing to abandon the practice of burning the stubble and adopt environment-friendly technologies like paddy straw management (PSM).

This must not be seen as a mere enforcement problem that can be resolved by penalising errant farmers and state agencies. There are economic and behavioural issues behind farmers' reluctance to leave behind a tested and proven technique for a relatively untested technology. These need to be addressed. The expenses incurred towards adopting costlier farm practices could be borne by the state and there needs to be a concerted outreach by the agriculture establishment to familiarise farmers with the new technologies.

Two years ago, the NGT took a grave view of air pollution in winter, banned the practice of stubble burning, and ordered Punjab and Haryana, the rice-wheat bowls of northern India, to enable farmers to adopt a technology-driven solution while penalising the ones who refuse to abide by the order. The NGT's concern is understandable: Pollution-related ailments are on the rise and the state appeared indifferent to the problem. The Delhi High Court too had given a similar ruling and cautioned the chief secretaries of Punjab, Haryana, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh that they will be held accountable if the practice was not stopped.

Yet, the results have been patchy. This newspaper has reported how Punjab's government planned to parade 21 farmers from an "adopted" village before the NGT to cover its tracks. This is to be expected. Farmers shifted to burning the stubble decades ago because it had become expensive and time-consuming to use manual labour to remove it after harvest. In the absence of a viable market for the stubble, it made economic sense to burn the crop residue.

How best to nudge farmers to adopt environment-friendly agri practices, is the question. The government needs to look beyond fiats and explore the option of financial incentives to clear the air.

END

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