

UP IN THE AIR — ON STUBBLE BURNING

Relevant for: Environment & Disaster Management | Topic: Environmental Pollution - Air, Water, Soil & E-waste

The onset of the winter season has come to be associated with toxic atmospheric pollution in north India. This year will be a crucial test for a scheme piloted by the Union government to address the winter haze. While road dust and pollution from heavy vehicles are primarily responsible for the noxious pall that sets on Delhi and other urban centres, the burning of paddy stubble by farmers to clear their fields for the next crop is considered to be responsible for 20% of the smog. To address this, and under directions from the Supreme Court-constituted Environment Pollution (Prevention and Control) Authority, or EPCA, the Centre is partnering with Punjab, Haryana and Uttar Pradesh to provide farmers with a range of mechanised implements to clear their fields of paddy crop residue to prepare for sowing wheat. There is a 50% subsidy to farmers, and a 75% waiver to cooperative societies, agencies that rent out equipment, farmers' interest groups or gram panchayats to buy such machines. States have got nearly 650 crore to help farmers buy subsidised equipment such as Happy Seeder, paddy straw choppers and Zero Till Drill. Punjab, which of the three States has the largest acreage under paddy, has a target of procuring 24,315 machines by October 15. A task force, headed by the Principal Secretary to the Prime Minister and comprising Environment Ministry officials and Chief Secretaries of these States, have been meeting since January to prepare for the winter.

Reports, however, suggest that many farmers, particularly those with land holdings of less than 5 acres, remain sceptical of the efficiency of these machines. Among their concerns is whether these machines will affect productivity. Many have told officials that they are worried there could be damage to the soil. Therefore, just making technological tools available may not be enough; there needs to be proactive engagement to both persuade and reassure farmers. Ironically, it was technology that contributed to the problem in the first place. The rising cost of labour nudged farmers to adopt mechanised equipment that, while efficient, left behind much longer stalks of paddy than what the traditional practice of removing them by hand did. The greater availability of machines and the zero-tolerance policy need to be seen as works in progress to derive lessons on how to refine the crop-clearing process in an ecologically sound manner. There must also be a sense of proportion, as 80% of the atmospheric pollution in Delhi in winter draws from sources other than burning stubble. Given Delhi's geography, low wind speeds and a spike in local pollution (from vehicles, biomass burning, firecrackers, etc.) raise the particulate matter count dramatically during winter. To be effective, the fight against pollution must necessarily be broad-based.

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