

PUTTING OUT FIRES

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The Nation Capital Region (NCR) has had a foggy beginning to its autumn. The air quality in the area turned "poor" in early October after being "moderate" or "satisfactory" for much of the summer and monsoon. The Supreme Court-mandated Environment Pollution Control Authority (EPCA) has rolled out the Graded Action Response Plan that envisages taking of progressive steps without waiting for the red light to go on. A ban on diesel generators and construction activities has come into effect. However, by all accounts, pollution control authorities in the NCR don't expect much improvement in the area's air quality in the next two days. Their pessimism stems from the failure to check crop residue burning in Punjab and Haryana, despite a ban on the practice in the two states.

Farm fires, according to a Ministry of Agriculture report, lead to a 70 per cent increase in carbon dioxide levels. The problem came to light more than a decade ago. But it's been on the anvil of pollution control agencies — the National Green Tribunal, Central Pollution Control Board and the EPCA — for only about four years. Initially, these authorities spent most of their energies in asking the Punjab and Haryana governments to ban stubble burning. Some incentives to wean farmers away from the practice were introduced this year. Fines for stubble burning are currently accompanied by subsidies ranging from 50 per cent to 80 per cent to buy farm equipment, such as Happy Seeders and the Super SMS combine attachment, which help manage agricultural waste. However, even this carrot-and-stick policy does not seem to be producing the desired results.

Farmers shifted to crop burning nearly two decades ago because it had become expensive and time-consuming to use manual labour to prepare the field for the new sowing season. It's also well-known that agriculturists burn residue because throughout the Green Revolution era, the National Agriculture Research System advised them to clear fields before sowing. The Punjab and Haryana governments do have programmes to educate farmers about the new farm practices. But very few officials of the Krishi Vigyan Kendras have the skills required to begin changing mindsets. They do not have ground-level experience of working with the Happy Seeders. Moreover, with heavy rains damaging crops in the last week of September and the sharp increase in diesel prices, farmers in the two states have been inclined to burn the waste, and face the risk of fines, rather than invest in a machine that will be used for barely a few days in a year. Schemes to buy the stubble for use in biomass plants could have been a solution to this problem. The Punjab government did introduce a few such projects last year. But this year, its focus has been on reducing wastage at the farm level.

The two state governments should realise that ending crop burning would require engaging with farmers on several fronts — not just subsidising new farm equipment.

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