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'Stubble burning can stop if farmers are well convinced of Happy Seeder'

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Stubble burning in the northern states of Punjab and Haryana can be completely stopped if the benefits of the Happy Seeder machine are driven home and farmers are incentivised to use it, says the not-for-profit India Paryavaran Sahayak (IPS) Foundation.

It has started with 'ChangeBuddy' programme in five districts of Punjab to persuade the farmers indulging in stubble burning to use Happy Seeder, which clears the loose straw that creates problems in sowing and thus rules out the possibility of stubble burning.

As the machine is expensive at Rs 150,000 and renting it costs farmers almost Rs 1,500 per acre, the IPS Foundation said it has decided to provide an incentive of Rs 400 per acre if farmers hire the Happy Seeder. On its part, the central government provides a 50 per cent subsidy for purchasing the machine.

The Foundation has selected 155 villages in five districts -- Barnala, Hoshiarpur, Sangrur, Fatehgarh Sahib, and Rupnagar -- for the initiative.

The initiative could provide much relief to farmers who want to use the Happy Seeder but end up burning the paddy remains due to financial constraints, IPS Foundation CEO Ritesh Bhatia said.

"Many bodies, including the government, are working on the issue. Our initiative is just a different route to expand the objective. Under the 'ChangeBuddy' programme, we have got progressive farmers to share their experiences about using Happy Seeder with other farmers," he said after a session with farmers in Mehla Chowk village of Sangarur district last week.

The Foundation has raised over Rs 50 lakh from 11 corporates to support the initiative, he said.

"We are working in about 155 villages. For monetary assistance part, we have registered farmers with their land details. After the sowing season ends, we will audit their farms and give them Rs 400 per acre if they have chosen Happy Seeder over burning the residue," Bhatia explained.

Amarik Singh from Sangrur's Namol village is a 'ChangeBuddy'. He owns a Happy Seeder and has started renting it out.

"My farmer friends are in a dual mind. They do not want to burn stubble but they are not sure about Happy Seeder option either. So I have taken up the job to promote benefits of the machine. And some farmers in my village have responded positively," he said.

Another ChangeBuddy from Mehla Chowk village, Chamkor Singh, said he has found the expenses on the use of the Happy Seeder are not much compared to other machinery that still requires some kind of straw burning before sowing.

"I would burn my farm till last year. I have bought a Happy Seeder this year at the subsidised cost of Rs 75,000. After seeding I have found the expenses were not much. So I am appealing farmers in my village to use the machine. Also, I earn money by renting out my Happy Seeder," he said.

EY Foundation India is among the donors to the IPS Foundation. Public awareness through demonstrations can bring about the change in farmers, said EY Foundation Director Sridhar Iyer said. EY Foundation is the not-for-profit arm of Indian member firms of EY Global.

"We want to act as a catalyst between the government and farmers. We are taking the progressive farmers with their experiences with Happy Seeder, scientists, farm experts to different villages, who clear doubts the local farmers have," he said.

Nukkads (street plays) and wall paintings are among the forms of public presentations that are quite effective in the rural areas, Iyer said.

Bhatia said his Foundation has tried its best to spread awareness and register farmers for incentives in its first year of operations.

"Though there is reduction in stubble burning this year, it could happen after Diwali also. So we are keeping our fingers crossed. We hope our programme will dissuade them from burning their stubble," he said.

Although the Union Agriculture Ministry officials claim that stubble burning has reduced by 50 per cent this year, they say the real picture will be known only about a week after Diwali when the farm labour returns and the true extent of the burning can be gauged.

Last year, Punjab farmers burnt 187 lakh tonnes of paddy residue on 75 lakh acres of farmland, an official said.

Paddy stubble is not used as cattle fodder in Punjab and Haryana and it takes up to six months for its complete disposal by natural methods so farmers choose to get rid of it by resorting to burning, said Ajai Malik, senior program manager at the IPS Foundation.