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Why farmers still continue to burn stubble in Punjab, Haryana

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There is a visible reduction in the volume of post-harvest stubble-burning in Punjab and Haryana this year owing to the promotion of farm machinery backed by financial assistance by government and awareness programmes.

But I am nervous as I heard this machine lowers the output," said the farmer from Sangrur's Namol village. Gursharan Singh from the same village firmly believes the Happy Seeder lowers crop output.

There is a need to restore confidence among farmers that the Happy Seeder is affordable and does not impact the yield, said Sridhar Iyer of the EY Foundation.

The EY Foundation, along with NGO India Paryavaran Sahayak (IPS) Foundation is working in five districts of Punjab to spread awareness about Happy Seeder and to make it available on rent to farmers at a subsidised rate.

"When the Happy Seeders are used, sprouting cannot be seen easily for some days due to the straw. It makes farmers nervous. So we have to clear their doubts to encourage them to use the Happy Seeder," Iyer said.

H.S. Sidhu, a Senior Agricultural Engineer at Borlaug Institute for South Asia (BISA), said the apprehensions would not subside until the farmers themselves use the machine.

"The farmers would have to get rid of the fear they have by using the Happy Seeder. It is about self-realisation. It would happen eventually," said Sidhu, who was a part of the PAU-led team that designed the machine.

An agriculture researcher from Haryana said the farmers in the region believed that more tillage of land leads to more production so they burn stubble and use Rotavator, which chops the straw into small pieces using rotating blades and spreads it inside the soil.

"The concept might have been true around 30 years ago. However, it is no more effective with the introduction of hybrid seed varieties. There is need to explain it to farmers with scientific demonstration," said the Karnal-based researcher, who did not wish to be named.

According to the Punjab's Agriculture department, over 25,000 machines, including approximate 8,000 Happy Seeders were purchased this year at subsidised rates in the state.

However, small and marginal farmers like Maninder Singh can neither afford to buy a Happy Seeder nor can they find one on rent"

"There is only one machine for three villages in our area. I do not know when my turn will come if I want to use the Happy Seeder," said Maninder Singh, who cultivates three-acres.

Punjab's Agriculture Director, J.S. Bains, admitted that not all farmers had access to Happy Seeders.

“This year, stubble burning has gone down by almost 60-70 per cent. Many farmers have rented Happy Seeders from 8,000 CHCs in the state. There may be a section of small farmers, who could not use it. But they will also soon be brought on board,” Bains told IANS.