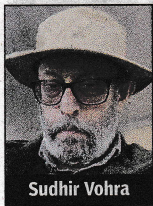


Law delaying sowing of paddy holds key to Delhi's foul air

MY PRESCRIPTION



Sudhir Vohra

In the escalating debate on the effect of stubble burning—which causes farm fires in Punjab and Haryana

—on air quality in Delhi and rest of NCR, one important point has been missed. And that is where lies the root of the problem.

In 2007 and 2008, Punjab State Farmers and Farm Workers' Commission (PSFC), a body tasked to look at issues concerning farmers in that state, suggested that the sowing of paddy in the state be delayed by a month. This it said could be achieved by enacting a law restricting farmers from sowing their paddy seedlings till the 10th of May and

from transplanting paddy till the 10th of June every year.

The immediate objective of that proposed legislation was to arrest the dropping levels of groundwater in the state. Initially, both Congress and Akali governments shied away from enacting such a law (as they felt it would not be liked by farmers). The Punjab Preservation of Sub Soil Water Act, 2009, was finally enacted. Haryana quickly enacted an identical act in 2010.

Both states have been growing paddy since the early seventies, three decades before the act was notified. Paddy is a water guzzling crop and it indeed leads to depletion of groundwater in some regions of these states. This move, however, failed to anticipate its effect on the neighbouring states.

Farmers in both states began delaying their paddy crop

by about 30 days. The farmers used to begin the sowing of seedlings earlier in April, right after harvesting the wheat crop and sometimes even earlier as the area needed for seedlings is about 1% of the area needed post transplantation. This initial 30 days of delay in the sowing pattern had various implications for the crop.

First, the advantage of a hardy, disease-resistance paddy was lost. April and May are hot and dry months in these states. This helps the seedlings to become hardier and less disease-prone when transplanted after the customary 30 days of growth. This advantage was lost post 2009 and resulted in excessive use of chemical medicines.

Secondly, the harvesting date of the paddy crop was advanced by 30 days, and sometimes more. That resulted in the crop being harvested in late

October and early November, months which coincide with Diwali as well as with the weeks when the autumn air gets colder and heavier. This delay of a month or more also coinci-

des with burning of autumn leaves and of the post-monsoon brush growth which also adds to the air pollution.

Prior to the enactment of Punjab Preservation of Sub

Soil Water Act, 2009, the paddy crop would be harvested in late September, just when the monsoon starts its retreat and when the air is cleaner. Since there is no cold weather

to bother about in September, there is no fog or smog.

Agricultural technocrats in the Punjab state may still argue that the act helps in conserving groundwater in April and May and thus it made sense to enact the law then. What they don't want to tell us is that very little water is drawn from the soil in April (when the Rabi crop needs to dry up before harvesting around Baisakhi) and the farmer is forced to keep his land fallow for a month because of the act and that one month is not good for anything meaningful to be grown. They also fail to tell us that the 30-day delay forced on them by the act results in both extra expenditure on pesticides as well as a further delay in sowing of the next winter (Rabi) crop. And, of course, they don't tell us how this 30-day delay causes pol-

lution in the NCR and the "downward states" south of Punjab and Haryana.

While paddy needs water, one of the reasons for the water crisis in Punjab and Haryana is the decrepit state of the canal system, especially for agricultural use. Much of canal water is now being used to feed urban areas with drinking water and the original beautiful canal network and its associated advantage of recharging agricultural aquifers has been lost. The result is that whatever groundwater recharge takes place now is from the monsoon rain and not from the canal system.

Now that we know that the foul air in NCR is largely due to the untimely burning of crop straw in Punjab and Haryana, it may be time for the Centre to review the act.

Sudhir Vohra is an architect and urban planner

FOR AND AGAINST

THE LAW | Restricts farmers from sowing paddy seedlings till May 10 and from transplanting paddy till June 10

WHY | To arrest dropping levels of groundwater in Punjab/Haryana

WHY NOT | Little water drawn from soil in April (when Rabi crop needs to dry up before harvesting around Baisakhi); farmer forced to keep his land fallow for a month

➤ 30-day delay results in extra expenditure on pesticides and further delay in sowing of next winter (Rabi) crop

➤ Causes wide-scale pollution in NCR



Photo: PTI

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