Farmer smogged
Faisal Hassan October 25, 2020
November is critical for people from cities and rural areas.

November means smog for city folks. November means wheat sowing season for farmers and rice/sugarcane harvesting, and cotton picking simultaneously. The smog has brought a lot of awareness and everyone is trying to find the root causes of smog. One of the causes of smog is linked to rice straw burning by farmers after a harvest. The farmer is ridiculed, blamed, threatened by Section 144 and fined for straw burning. Will this help in stopping the farmer from burning straw? The answer is a flat ‘no’. The burning of straw is unfortunately a necessity for the farmer and which is done with reluctance after manual collection of straw options have been exhausted. November is the month of shortages for the farmer.

Shortages of labour, time, machinery and capital for sowing of wheat and other farm operations like straw collection is a common occurrence. Mechanical straw handling like baling and straw chopping in large numbers is not available at the present moment. The importance of straw as a valuable resource can be gauged by the selection criteria of the famous aromatic variety of basmati, selected before partition, and is a joint heritage of both India and Pakistan; Basmati 370. The palatability of rice straw for the animals was also one of the criteria for selection of Basmati 370 as the best aromatic variety for growing in the traditional rice belt. Of course, this was an added benchmark for selection besides aroma cooking quality and yield parameters compared to other varieties.

The burning of rice straw started in the mid 80s with the introduction of combine harvesters for rice and wheat. Mechanised harvesting led to quick harvest of grains and an increase in grain yield due to less harvesting losses but left a trail of rice straw behind. Mechanisation of rice straw handling lagged way behind, a shortage of labour at rice harvesting time was a problem and the perception of the farmer that burning of rice straw is good for the yield of the next wheat crop; all of this results in large scale burning.
Smog is the sisterly bond between Lahore and New Delhi. Both cities are victims of smog and are trying to find solutions to it but are failing miserably. However, the only thing that is successful is the app on your phone which tells how bad the air is. India is far ahead in mechanisation of handling of rice straw. Subsidised machinery above 900 crores Indian rupees has been given to the farmers in rice growing states of the north, but the outcome is not very encouraging. The farmers find it uneconomical to use the machinery and want a financial incentive of around Rs3000 per acre to chop or collect straw. Last year, on November 6, 2019 the Supreme Court of India announced an incentive of Rs 100 per quintal on paddy harvests for small farmers for not burning straw. The Punjab government in Pakistan is also planning to give a package for rice farmers with a component of subsidised machinery for straw handling and wheat sowing without burning rice straw.

My view; subsidy is never sustainable as machinery manufacturers will jack up the prices of equipment. Subsidy is given in the name of the farmer, but the beneficiaries are others. I would love to be proven wrong. So what is the way forward? The only thing that will work is empathy for the farmer, a change in attitude towards the farmer and forming a symbiotic relationship with the farmer that benefits both; the consumer and farmer. In my view, the farmer should be rewarded by the private and public sector for sustainable practices to produce food based on sound ecological practices and high consumer standards. November has become the fifth season, the smoggy season.
My suggestions on tackling smog are slightly different compared to the Indian way. The mechanical method we should adopt is what the Indians are now following: A device fitted behind the combine to chop the straw and spread it on the field, followed by zero tillage of wheat with happy seeder or zero till drills. In Pakistan, zero drill of wheat is quite common and a happy seeder is the improved version of zero tillage for planting wheat. Wheat will be zero tilled even now; the question is what will happen to the unchopped rice straw thrown by the machine behind rows. It will be burnt, come what may. We have to try to stop the burning. How do we do it? It cannot be done alone. It is a war against pollution. Everyone has to be involved, from the government to the army to people in the city and of course, the farmer.

Declare the month of November a holiday for schools especially in rural areas. The concept behind school holidays was basically to help family members in planting and sowing of crops in England and America. For northern India and Pakistan, November is the month of sowing wheat and harvesting of crops. Give the incentive of one bag of wheat seed and basal fertiliser to the farmer for not burning straw; an investment made by the government or city folks recoverable at harvest time. This is an opportunity for the city folks to do some rural tourism and make a connection with the farmer. The farmer is depressed by seeing his crop yield plunge low, especially wheat maize and now rice due to high temperatures. An immediate increase and announcement of a support price of wheat is a must to raise his morale. A must now; insurance against natural calamities and not like India where insurance companies make windfall profits and farmers are left empty handed and end up reading the terms and conditions of the insurance policy.
I genuinely feel the straw burning will drastically decrease but not completely. In India, the peak burning season is almost over. In Pakistan, this year the main thrust of the crop is going to come soon so these interventions can make an impact.

The farmer has to be assisted physically by helping in removing straw from the field; financially by investing in wheat sowing; motivationally, by just visiting him and appreciating his efforts; intellectually, by understanding his concerns and hardships and making the society aware of it by writing. Smog is an eyesore and also a wakeup call for all of us on what we have done to our environment. Smog is the feedback from nature to change our destructive path in farming, manufacturing and lifestyle.

Rivers have been turned into sewer canals. Carcinogenic chemicals are being sprayed on soil and plants have made farming a cancer-causing profession. Nature is mad. In India, between the years 1995 and 2015, more than 300,000 farmers committed suicide. A farmer is a farmer be it Indian or Pakistani. The temp rise and other natural calamities in the last one year have reduced yields of all crops in double digits. My genuine fear is, if this trend continues both hostile nuclear neighbours would be importing wheat in near future.

We should all go to war against smog and not rest until we breathe in clean fresh air in November.

Note: This article was written in November 2019 and is being published a year later.