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## **Get Punjab farmers to sow 3 crops in a year: Study**

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**CHANDIGARH:** Farmers in Punjab should be encouraged to sow three crops in a year because the agro-climatic and marketing conditions allow farmers to increase cropping intensity up to 300%. This will not only bring higher economic returns but also improve environmental and social sustainability of farm enterprises.

The recommended has been made by Sukhwinder Singh, senior research associate in the Public Health Foundation of India. He had conducted a study on agriculture sustainability in Punjab as part of the policy series by the Punjabi University's Centre for Development Economics and Innovation Studies.

The study suggests that the Punjab government can encourage farmers to sow a third crop, preferably a non-irrigated crop like legume during May-June. It would also improve soil health by supplying additional nitrogen. However, it does not mean that farmers can sow a third crop along with cultivation of paddy in the kharif season. Farmers will either have to stop paddy cultivation or reduce the area under paddy to spare water for the third crop.

It has also come to fore that the culture of mono-cropping and subsequent mechanisation of farm operations pushed farm labour, local artisans and women out of farming in Punjab, whereas in other Indian states, they are contributing to the farm sector considerably.

The study also says that in the post Covid-19 phase, the Punjab government must consider promoting rural agribusiness like food processing, which is currently non-existent in Punjab, and fine-tuning the current agricultural marketing systems to improve the overall agricultural sustainability.

## **Limitations of PAU**

Pointing out limitations of the focus of the Punjab Agriculture University (PAU), the study says, “Although PAU has made considerable efforts to provide the latest varieties of seeds to maintain yield rates of crops, these efforts so far have been restricted to wheat and rice.” It recommends that scientists have to provide short-duration crop varieties to facilitate cultivation of three crops in a year. “Extensionists might need to update their knowledge on new crops and their cultivation methods as they have specialized around wheat- rice production systems for decades,” reads the study.

It has been noted that despite the Punjab government’s consistent but largely failed crop diversification policy and programmes, the area under rice cultivation in Punjab has constantly been increasing since 1990.

## **Cropping pattern unsustainable**

Punjab’s current cropping patterns are economically unsustainable and need a multidimensional investigation, says the study. The researcher found that from an economic sustainability angle, a typical farmer spent Rs 84,374 and earned Rs 12,055 from each hectare annually. A typical farm enterprise of 4.8 hectares could generate an annual income of Rs 50,201 which does not include income from allied activities like dairy and fishery.

“Considering the per capita income, a member of a farming family of Punjab has Rs 46 (\$0.93) to spend in a day. If those who live on \$1.25 a day are poor as per the International Fund for Agriculture Development (IFAD) estimation, an average farm household of ‘so called’ agriculturally advanced states like Punjab is in deep poverty,” finds the study.

## **Stop free power to big farmers**

The current regime of free electricity to the farm sector is not really benefiting a large portion of farmers who are either not using groundwater or not able to install big tubewells to pull water from deeper levels. “Therefore, this regime should be rationalised by ending power subsidy to medium and large farmers cultivating more than 10 acres so that small and marginal farmers could be sustained,” recommends the study.

Groundwater depletion in Punjab mainly in the central zone having rice belt covering 50% land area of the state is a serious concern in relation to the environmental sustainability, says the study. It has been noticed that between 2000 and 2010, the groundwater level on 92% of the farms in the central zone had depleted by more than 0.60 metres annually. The study says it is likely that if the existing policy framework for groundwater resources in the state like free electricity to the farm sector, particularly for paddy cultivation and the MSP regime, continues, Punjab might end up losing much of its groundwater resources.

## **Water Act needs review**

It has also been recommended that The Punjab Preservation of Sub Soil Water Act, 2009, which currently forbids farmers to transplant rice before June 15, needs reviewing as one-fifth of the farmers surveyed during the study agreed to delay sowing of rice by another two weeks. Additionally, as monsoons reach Punjab by the first or second week of July, June 15 could be extended to June 30 as that would help save water used for rice cultivation without compromising the productivity levels. Actually, Punjab government should discourage paddy cultivation and find out alternative kharif crops which can be sown any time between May and July.