

NATURAL FARMING

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Context:

In her Budget proposals for 2024-25, Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman announced that over the next two years, one crore farmers nationwide will be introduced to natural farming, supported by certification and branding initiatives.

Background:

Among states, Andhra Pradesh is a front runner in adopting natural farming but studies have raised concerns about the sustainability and yield (productivity) potential of this farming method.

National Mission on Natural Farming (NMNF):

1. Government through the mission intends to motivate farmers to adopt chemical-free farming.
2. The natural farming scheme under the 'Bharatiya Prakritik Krishi Paddhati' has a total outlay of ₹4,645.69 crore for six years (2019-20 to 2024-25).
3. Government believes that the success requires a behavioural shift from chemical-based to cow-based, locally-produced inputs.

What are the features and benefits of Natural Farming?

1. No chemical fertilizers and pesticides used.
2. Promotes traditional indigenous practices.
3. Emphasizes on-farm biomass recycling, biomass mulching, cow dung-urine formulations, botanical pest control, and exclusion of synthetic chemicals.
4. Improves natural nutrient cycling and soil organic matter.
5. It is a diversified farming system integrating crops, trees, and livestock allowing the optimum use of functional biodiversity.
6. Potential benefits: increased farmer income, restored soil fertility, improved environmental health, and reduced greenhouse gas emissions.

Challenges and Concerns:

1. Large-scale transition is a matter of concern due to India's large population and food security needs.
2. Divergent results from studies on Zero Budget Natural Farming (ZBNF):
3. CESS Study (Andhra Pradesh): Lower costs of biological inputs, improved yields and incomes for farmers.
4. ICAR-IIFSR Study: Significant decline in wheat (59%) and basmati rice (32%) yields, raising concerns about sustainability and productivity.

Lessons from Sri Lanka:

1. Complete shift to organic farming led to economic and political turmoil in Srilanka.
2. Ban on chemical fertilizers resulted in fertilizer shortages, reduced crop yields, food security risks, price escalations, and protests.

Way Forward:

1. Extensive studies and scientific assessments needed before large-scale adoption.
2. Natural farming could be beneficial locally but may not be viable nationwide due to food security concerns.
3. Noted economist M.S. Sidhu recommends rigorous scientific tests, especially on crop yields, before nationwide implementation.
4. Suggests using natural farming for supplementary foodstuffs rather than staple cereals like wheat and rice.



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