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Union budget 2018: Special focus on fight against pollution in Delhi-NCR

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The poor air quality in the National Capital Region has been blamed partly on the burning of crop stubble by farmers in Punjab, Haryana and Uttar Pradesh.(File)

Union finance minister Arun Jaitley on Thursday announced a special scheme to support the governments of Delhi and neighbouring states in tackling high levels of air pollution that have led to public health emergencies in the region over the last three winters.

The poor air quality in the National Capital Region has been blamed partly on the burning of crop stubble by farmers in Punjab, Haryana and Uttar Pradesh.

“Air pollution in the Delhi-NCR region has been a cause of concern. A special scheme will be implemented to support the efforts of the governments of Haryana, Punjab, Uttar Pradesh and Delhi to address air pollution and subsidise machinery required for in situ management of the crop residue,” Jaitley said in his budget speech.

The National Green Tribunal (NGT) had in November 2015 banned the burning of crop residue in five states — Punjab, Haryana, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh and Delhi – but several ground reports have shown that farmers continue to use this quick-fix method to empty farmlands for the next crop cycle.

In October 2017, Punjab demanded a subsidy to the tune of R2,000 crore from the Centre as aid for farmers to look for alternatives to stubble burning. An estimated 35 million tonnes of crop residue is set on fire in Punjab and Haryana alone to make room for the winter crop.

Even though no amount was not mentioned in the budget speech on Thursday, the Centre had in January told the Supreme Court that R1,000 crore would be earmarked to tackle the problem of stubble burning in Delhi’s neighbouring states.

Subsidies will be provided to farmers to purchase machines such as seeders and rotavators to deal with farm residue in a manner that does not require it to be burnt. A flat subsidy of 50% of purchase price has been recommended through a direct benefit transfer mechanism to individual farmers willing to buy the machines. In case of cooperative societies, farmer groups or gram panchayats, a subsidy of 75% of the cost of the machinery could be provided.

“The Supreme Court-appointed Environment Pollution Prevention and Control Authority (EPCA) had looked at the report. The R1,000-crore plan to provide subsidy is a good step but needs to be implemented quickly. The process has to be expedited and the government needs to make sure that by next winter these machinery are in place,” EPCA member Sunita Narain said.

The Delhi government wants to wait and see how much they actually get from the special scheme.

“It is too early to comment. Let them announce the total allocations to states and let us wait till December when we will need to take measures to prevent crop burning,” said Delhi deputy chief minister Manish Sisodia, who also holds the finance portfolio.

On Monday, the Economic Survey had suggested detailed measures to tackle air pollution in Delhi-NCR, including steps to handle the problem of stubble burning in states around Delhi. It had suggested conversion of agricultural waste into usable fodder or biofuels to tackle burning of crop residue, one of the major causes of pollution in the region.

The survey also identified vehicular emissions and construction activity as causes of high pollution levels in Delhi and its surrounding areas. It recommended solutions such as congestion pricing for vehicles, expanding and improving the public bus system to reduce private vehicle use, phasing out of old vehicles, and accelerating Bharat Stage VI (BS VI) emissions norms due to be in place from April 2020.

“Air pollution is a concern for all, especially Delhi-NCR and beyond. A special scheme with a time-bound objective for strategic in situ control of air pollution would definitely help check dispersal of pollutants,” said former Central Pollution Control Board air laboratory chief Dipankar Saha.

Experts, however, feel more needs to be done on the part of the Union government.

“Air pollution is a national crisis and requires support for wider mix of solutions in all critically polluted areas. The budget doesn’t realise the larger problem of the air pollution and the need for a swift transition to cleaner fuel like gas and a more organised public transport system across India,” said Narain, who also heads the Centre for Science and Environment.