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## Incentives will hinder tobacco phase out measures

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The decision of the Tobacco Board to purchase excess and unauthorised tobacco grown by farmers in the region has attracted criticism from the Anti Tobacco Forum (ATF) of the city. The incentives by successive governments to unauthorised tobacco growers will hinder the process of phasing out its cultivation, the ATF members said.

On the other hand, tobacco farmers are not happy about the recent decision. They said, the order is "too little too late" for them.

Speaking to Deccan Herald, Vasanthkumar Mysoremath of ATF, said, the Tobacco Board was regularly procuring illegally grown tobacco. "By agreeing to buy unauthorised and excess tobacco from farmers who violate the guidelines of the license issued to them, the government is abetting a crime," he said. By succumbing to the tobacco lobby and due to pressure from "vote bank", successive elected representatives of the region have done little to regulate tobacco cultivation, he said.

"In the year 2001-02, there were about 25,000 licensed growers of tobacco in the district. By 2011-12, the number had swelled to 73,000, of which 40,000 were license growers and the remaining were unauthorised," he said. Even the licensed farmers do not adhere to permit norms and grow more than the limits prescribed. By buying it, the government is encouraging people to cultivate tobacco, he said.

He added that the government should increase its efforts to ensure that 80 per cent of tobacco cultivation is phased out by 2020.

Adding credence to the allegations levelled, according to Tobacco Board, the total amount of unauthorised and excess tobacco grown in Mysore and Periyapatna region in 2014-15 was 11.58 million kilograms (mkg). In Mysore region, which consists of H D Kote, Hunsur and Kamalapur, 10,325 licensed farmers grew an excess of 2.47 mkg and 10,105 unauthorised farmers grew 4.19 mkg.

In Periyapatna region, consisting of Periyapatna and Ramanathapura, 14,875 licensed farmers cultivated an excess of 1.66 mkg, while 11,742 unauthorised farmers cultivated 3.26 mkg of the crop. As per data, the number of unauthorised growers were 21,857.

### Too little too late

The decision to buy excess and unauthorised tobacco has not brought any cheers to farmers, who have dismissed the order as too little, too late.

Basavaraju K, of Tobacco Growers Association, said even though an order was issued to buy the said tobacco three days ago, the process is yet to start. "Every year, even excess and unauthorised tobacco used to be auctioned by January 25. However, it is yet to start this year," he said.

The tobacco has been processed a year ago. Delay in procuring it has resulted in degradation in both quality and quantity. The amount announced as support price would be insufficient, he said.

On phasing out tobacco cultivation, he said, the farmers were ready to stop cultivating it if government comes forward with a plan.

"We have been hearing about phasing out the crop for the past several years. Considering the loss suffered by farmers this year, not many are keen to cultivate tobacco in future. However, without an alternative crop that would give the same returns to farmers, it would be hard to woo the farmers out from tobacco cultivation," he said.

An official from the Agriculture department, who did not wish to be quoted, said that the Agriculture and Horticulture departments were jointly organising programmes to encourage farmers to stop tobacco cultivation. However, the number of farmers who have come forward is not encouraging, he said.

### Proposals

Mysuru-Kodagu Lok Sabha Member Prathap Simha said, even though there are proposals to phase out tobacco, it would not be possible if equally profitable crops are not offered to farmers for alternative cultivation. Close to 5.5 lakh families are dependent on the crop for livelihood, he said.

As a measure to reduce the cultivation of tobacco, decisions are being taken at the government level. Tobacco production target for Karnataka, which has been 103 mkg during the past year, has been reduced to 100 mkg this year. There is also a proposal not to advance loans to farmers, who cultivate tobacco on irrigated land, he said.

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