Ban on Agro-Chemical Products

Why in news?

The Union agriculture ministry made a proposal to ban 27 commonly used plant protection chemicals, due to disputable environmental and health concerns.

What is the proposal?

- The government plans to ban 27 widely used pesticides.
- The government has shortlisted these 27 from the 66 contentious pesticides being reviewed.
- Out of these 66 under review, the government has already banned 18 pesticides in 2018.
- The 27 pesticides now include popular molecules such as monocrotophos, acephate, carbofuran, 2,4-D and carbendazim.
- These have been found to contaminate water bodies and underground water.
- They are said to cause health hazards to humans, animals and honey bees that help in plant pollination.
- These are pesticides, which were banned, restricted or withdrawn in one or more countries but continued in India.
- However, now, companies may give their objections and representations within 45 days from May 14, 2020.
- After review of their objections, the final notification on the ban will be issued.

How significant are these 27 products?

- These 27 products account for some 20% of the country's agro-chemicals output.
- These include many broad-spectrum molecules that are used extensively to control a variety of pests, diseases, and weeds.
- Many of them have been in use for decades.
- They are in use without causing any visible harm to the environment, biodiversity, or human and animal health.
- They also constitute a sizeable part (70%) of the agro-chemicals exports, which are worth around Rs 21,000 crore a year.
- The domestic industry is likely to take a hit of Rs 8,000-9,000 crore, if the ban is implemented.

What are the conflicting responses?

- The move has evoked sharp criticism from all stakeholders in the agro-chemicals sector, including the industry and farmers.
- Agricultural scientists have also decried the move.
- They fear it may gravely hurt the farm sector, which has stood out as a silver lining in the coronavirus-battered economy.
- The agro-chemical industry intends to register its strong objection with the government.
- Only environmental activists have welcomed it, though without offering credible reasons for that.

What does it mean to farmers?

- Significantly, the farmers and their organisations are backing the industry in contesting this proposal.
- This is because most of the identified products are generic pesticides.
- They are, hence, far cheaper than their patented alternatives.
- The average cost of plant protection operations is now estimated at Rs 250-300 per acre.
- This might double with the use of expensive substitutes, thereby, further eroding the profitability of agriculture.

Is the proposal wise?

- Technically, only a few of these 27 products are said to fall in the “red” (most bio-hazardous) category of chemicals.
- But others are also being planned to be abandoned.
- This is because either they have been junked in certain other countries or they lack adequate safety data.
- The move thus disregards the wide-ranging ramifications of their withdrawal.
- Lessons from past experience of discarding versatile and cheap pesticides just to imitate the other countries is ignored.
- E.g. discarding the highly useful and inexpensive pesticide, DDT
- The malaria-eradication programme had made considerable headway in controlling mosquitoes.
- But this had collapsed due to the above hasty and ill-judged step.
- [Mosquitoes exit or even avoid DDT-sprayed dwellings.]
- Its cost-effective replacement has been elusive to date.
- The net result is the resurgence of mosquitoes and malaria.
- Importantly, there was emergence of several other vector-borne diseases like dengue and chikungunya, which were almost unheard of earlier.

What is a possible ramification now?

- The proposed phasing out of the versatile pesticide Malathion can potentially have a similar wide-ranging impact on the agricultural sector.
- Of particular concern in this case is the ongoing battle against the dreaded locusts.
- Malathion is the key chemical for its control.
- Ironically, the agriculture ministry itself is procuring large quantities of Malathion for the locust control programme even after deciding to ban it.

What is the way forward?

- The government should revisit its plan to proscribe so many agro-chemicals without properly weighing the pros and cons of the move.
- Undoubtedly, the truly hazardous molecules, carrying the red tag, should be abandoned straightaway.
- But the others need to be retained till their cost-effective and equally efficient generic substitutes are available.
- The need is to strike a balance between the economic and environmental concerns.

Source: The Economic Times, Business Standard

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