Policy stumble in Prevent Stubble Burning

What is the issue?

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- Crop residue burning poses an environmental and health hazard.
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- Hence, the Centre’s policy for mitigate the crisis needs cautious evaluation.
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What are the government initiatives?

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- Each acre of paddy generates about 2-3 MT (metric tonnes) of residue, which needs to be managed in a short window of about three weeks.
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- Otherwise, the farmer has to burn the residue (to get rid of them) in order to clear the field for sowing the next crop.
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- **Schemes -** The Centre has allocated Rs 1,050 crores to the states where crop residue burning poses a pollution hazard.
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- Additionally, union agricultural ministry is also implementing a scheme for mechanisation to ensure proper ‘crop residue management’.
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- Currently, the most cost-effective and beneficial way to manage the residue is to use the “zero-till sowing machine” called Happy Seeder.
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- Hence, the mechanisation scheme is targeted at manufacturers and envisions a supply of about 26,000 seeder machines to the market within 2 years.
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What are the challenges?

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- **Magnitude -** High-powered tractors and skilled personnel are required to operate Happy Seeders effectively, both of which are currently in short supply.
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- In addition to this, there are merely 2,000 Happy Seeders that are currently in use – which makes it a herculean task for the scheme to achieve its targets.
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- **Scheduling -** The current cropping pattern in priority states like Punjab is that paddy is sown in "July-October" season and wheat is sown in November.
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- The residual paddy stubble (of the July sowing) is what is burned in November (winter smog time) to clear the field for the Wheat.
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- If the wheat crop is mechanically sowed by using Happy Seeder, then there is no need for clearing the crop residue (seeding can be done in un-cleared fields).
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- But, to employ "Happy Seeder" effectively for the November wheat crop, the field needs to be levelled using a laser leveller before the July paddy is sown.
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- Also, the last watering of the paddy crop has to be timed according to the date of paddy harvest, which must coincide with the date of wheat sowing.
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- Such demanding timelines could be a big stress on the farmers due to the highly uncertain parameters under which they work.
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- **Confidence Building -** Firstly, the farmers have to be convinced that their yields will not suffer due to the use a Happy Seeder.
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- For this, farmers will have to be shown field demonstrations by employing Happy Seeders and reaping the same tonnage of produce.
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- But sadly, such demonstrations were undertaken on sufficient scale in the current crop cycle, which is nearing its end.
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- The government also needs to recognize that it is a big risk to push farmers to mechanised seeders without sufficient field data.
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- If employment of mechanised seeders sees a drop in crop yield, farmers might revert to stubble burning and become non-receptive to future advances.

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- **Bureaucracy -** Even the operational guidelines for the mechanisation scheme aren't ready and there is every indication that it is doomed to fail.
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- Even the scheme's draft seem to be a merely refurbishment of a pre-existing scheme for the overall promotion of mechanisation in agriculture.
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- Funding is spread over two years with the condition that funds will lapse if they are not utilised in the year for which they were allocated.
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- While the scheme is completely centrally funded, its implementation (a big challenge) lies with the states - these calls for better policy level coordination.
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- **Other Challenges -** Very few people in this system have ground-level experience of working on the new zero-till machines.
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- Blistering television commercials and programs as envisioned under the scheme are also unlikely to nudge farmers to take up mechanisation.
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- Rather, a peer-to-peer campaign could be considered, for which a corpus of information harbingers need to be commissioned at the village level.
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Source: Indian Express

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