Toxic Farming

What is the issue?

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- Around ten farmers have reportedly died after spraying ‘Profex Super’ insecticide on Bt cotton plantations in Yavatmal district of Maharashtra.
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- This has raised the demand for stronger regulation of insecticide sale and use in India.
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What are the causes?

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- **Guidance** - Cotton growers rely on high volumes of insecticides to prevent severe pest attacks.
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- This is increasingly due to the pressure to protect the investments made.
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- There is a lack of agricultural extension officers to advice farmers on the proper use of pesticides.
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- Resultantly, they rely on the advice of unscrupulous agents and commercial outlets for pesticides use.
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- Also, they do not take precautions such as wearing masks and covering themselves and checking the wind direction while spraying.
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- **Regulation** - The system of regulation of insecticides in India is obsolete.
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- A new Pesticides Management Bill introduced in 2008 was studied by the Parliamentary Standing Committee, but it is still pending.
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- Evidently, a large quantum of pesticides sold today is fake and they enjoy a higher growth rate than genuine products.
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- It is to be noted that agricultural products from India, including fruits and vegetables, have been subjected to import restrictions internationally for safety concerns.
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- **Other causes** - The increasing intensity of pesticide use is suspected to be due to the loss of efficacy of some genetically modified cotton in warding off pests.
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- Also, the Centre has failed to use its communication infrastructure, such as DD Kisan, Doordarshan dedicated to agriculture, etc to address distressed farmers, leading to their death.
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What should be done?

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- Focus on pesticide regulation is as important as focus on growth in agricultural production and exports.
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- Clearly, there is a need for a **high-level inquiry** into the nature of pesticides used across the country.
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- A forward-looking **farm policy** would minimise the use of toxic chemicals.
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- More importantly, the regulatory system should be enhanced.
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- It is imperative that a **Central Pesticides Board** be formed to advise on the proper use and disposal of pesticides.
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- This will strengthen the oversight of registration, distribution and sale of toxic chemicals.
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- The Insecticides Act of 1968 should be updated and a new law should come in its place.
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- This can eliminate the shortfalls in the current rules that govern enforcement and introduce penalties where there are none.
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- Aligning the new pesticides regulatory framework with **food safety laws** and

products used in health care will make it broad-based.
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- Encouraging **organic methods** of farming where they are efficacious could benefit both the farmer and the consumer.
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Quick Fact

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Profex Super Insecticide

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- Profex Super is a combination of Profenofos and Cypermethrin.
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- Environmental changes have resulted in huge attacks of bollworm and whitefly on cotton.
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- Also, cotton crop is increasingly vulnerable to pests such as bollworm in the current weather.
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- When sprayed without covering the mouth and nose, it causes adverse skin reactions, burning sensation, dizziness, and headaches.
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- Experts however doubt it to be a cause for death as it is not very toxic generally and the tragic results could be due to faulty application.
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Source: The Hindu

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