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"If we knew what we were doing it wouldn't be called research."

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## Tobacco research undermined

By Tahir Ali Khan

THE country's biggest tobacco research station in Mardan, severely handicapped by shortage of staff, is unable to offer much of the required expertise to farmers of the tobacco-rich region.

At least 60 per cent posts of research officers at the station, run by the Pakistan Tobacco Board (PTB), are lying vacant. No appointments and postings have been made against the posts of retiring officials.

Shortage of research and development staff at the PTB such as assistant development officers (ADOs) and field assistants in different districts is undermining its research and development activities and consequently liaison with tobacco farmers.

The government should not only fulfill the manpower needs of the facility but also provide development staff at the grass root/farm level, farmers demand.

The research station performs various functions and works to ensure production of quality tobacco crop in the region. "We have soil testing, plant pathology and breeding, and agronomy laboratories at the station. Experiments are conducted here on different crop vari-

eties using different ratios of fertiliser, both imported and local, insects/pests and disease control methods apart from holding work-

shops, seminars and field days for training and educating farmers and other stakeholders," said Ghulam Farid Marwat, manager at

the station.

Soil testing is carried out both at the station and at farm level. Soil sample from different areas of the

country are collected regularly, and analysed and the findings of the tests are conveyed to farmers.

The station is also working on green manure project in Mansehra in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Okara in Punjab.

"For producing green manure, Egyptian clover (Barseem) is mixed in the land. We have used half the quantity of NPK (fertiliser blended with ingredients of nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium) generally used in fields and have obtained better results.

The tobacco per hectare yield (PHY) increased from 2,600kg to 3,550kg with the improvement in soil condition. The technology and guidance would soon be transferred to farmers," he said.

The focus of PTB and the research station is on quality as well as quantity of the crop as smokers worldwide prefer quality tobacco leaves and products.

"Farmers are needed to grow only the recommended varieties-Speight G28, K399, RG4 and TM 2008. Tobacco companies do not buy tobacco other than these varieties. The new variety developed by PTB-TM 2008- has the potential to increase per hectare yield by over 20 per cent than the non-recommended varieties," Marwat said.

To a question, he said, whereas only about 20 per cent farmers in the past used to cultivate the rec-

ommended tobacco varieties, now most of them cultivate the recommended varieties. "This would help produce better quality tobacco crop generating more income for farmers and the country by boosting exporting of tobacco and its by-products," he hoped.

To minimise the use of wood in tobacco curing and avoiding deforestation, the facility has also built a solar-barn with the help of Peshawar University of Engineering and Technology. This energy is being used in curing tobacco.

"This has saved about 50 per cent fuel. The facility will be transferred to farmers in coming years. With the help of one time investment, farmers will save a lot in fuel expenses as well as the environment from pollution," he said.

The station is also working on a project of growing mushroom. After the curing season, the curing barns of tobacco farmers lie unused for months which will now be used for growing mushroom. The idea will be expanded at farm level later and farmers would be guided and provided technical know-how. This will create income opportunities for farmers on the one hand and ensure availability of a protein-rich food for the people on the other.

Though the station works in close collaboration with tobacco growers in solving their problems

and developing the crop, the liaison among growers, the station and the PTB seems to be weak and needs practical steps to strengthen it further.

The facility should have more land under tobacco seeds cultivation as against the present 16 acres. Obviously, the facility is providing limited quantity of free seeds to selected growers due to meagre production of seeds and has left the task to tobacco companies.

Besides Mardan's tobacco farm, there are four other sub-research stations for developing tobacco crop - two each in Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and one model farm in Buner which will be functional in next two years. Tobacco research stations are planned in Pishin, Balochistan, and Jampur Punjab in near future.

Secretary PTB Numan Bashir confirmed that PTB and the station were facing paucity of research and development staff and feared that it might impact liaison with farmers at root level.

"Most of the field assistants and ADOs have served for over 30 years now and have retired or are on the verge of retirement. For the moment, we have given additional charge to officers in some areas. Inductions will be made soon after go-ahead from the higher authorities," he added.



Photo by writer