

Govt should discourage tobacco farming

By Aftab Maken



L eading tobacco companies are encouraging the farmers to grow more tobacco to keep the cigarette factories running oblivious of the social cost of smoking, health hazards suffered

by farmers exposed to pesticides used on tobacco leaves and the overall environmental degradation caused by tobacco processing.

Public watchdogs are silent over this, ignoring the interests of the people living in the tobacco growing areas.

Although they are compromising health and environmental standards of tobacco growers and people, the leading cigarette-makers are not spending enough from their declared income for the welfare of the locals.

These cigarette manufacturers are also polluting the natural environment, as many inhabitants of the tobacco belt complain of allergies and other diseases linked to tobacco processing. Tobacco leaves contain nicotine, a drug that stimulates brain facilitating addiction to cigarettes.

The effects of the crop on overall well-being of the area can be gauged by the fact that nicotine is so poisonous that raw tobacco leaves are soaked in water overnight to make a natural pesticide.

Tobacco cultivation is of great value as a source of revenue, employment and foreign exchange earnings, although it occupies a relatively small area of 0.27 per cent of the total irrigated land in the country and about three per cent of NWFP.

During 2006-07, about Rs34 billion were contributed to the federal exchequer as excise duty and sales tax. Being a highly labour-intensive crop, about 80,000 people are involved in its cultivation, 50,000 are engaged in 22 factories of the tobacco industry and thousands more find indirect employment. It is also an important source of foreign exchange earning for the country (Rs570.177 million during 2006-07).

Like any other local or foreign industrial unit, the cigarette industry is legally bound to

contribute some portion of its income to the welfare of the local residents.

The residents of tobacco belt claim that they are not getting worthwhile welfare from the corporate social responsibility spending of the cigarette-makers.

Tobacco is the only crop in Pakistan having yields well above the world average and matches the per hectare yield in the US and other developed countries - an average yield of 1,900 kilograms per hectare.

In Pakistan, tobacco was cultivated over an area of 6.2 million hectares with production of 126 thousand tons during 2007, an increase of 11.5 per cent compared with the previous year. Tobacco growing, manufacturing, distribution and retailing employ over one million persons directly or indirectly.

The Federal Ministry of Food & Agriculture is campaigning for an increase in price and output of tobacco to protect the farming community. However, after printing the warning on cigarette packets, they forget to protect the consumers from the harmful effect of smoking.

Besides the cigarette manufactures, the other users of tobacco are the manufacturers of chewing tobacco (naswar, beera, paan, gutka, etc) are also causing cancer of mouth and lungs.

In order to promote sustainable development, a leading tobacco company has been at the forefront of afforestation efforts in the country. Under this programme, the company has planted over 52 million trees since the project started in 1981, the Pakistan Tobacco Company External Communication Manager told this correspondent, when asked for comments over the failure of the tobacco companies on social spending, especially welfare of the farmers.

Besides this programme, he further said that nine mobile units are regularly visiting rural areas to provide free medical services and other medical aid to the affected farmers and residents of the tobacco growing areas.

The company has also installed 18 plants for clean drinking water and introduced scholarship scheme for the students of the area, said the manager speaking on behalf of the company.

