

Three-year plan to let Delhi breathe

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NEW DELHI: Underlining air pollution as a serious problem, the government's think tank Niti Aayog in its latest action agenda has come out with a five-point remedy, including higher taxes on petrol\diesel, higher parking fees and shutting down coal-based power plants in a phased manner, to deal with the menace within three years.

Though whatever the Aayog suggested has already been in different phases of implementation under the government's plan of action, its emphasis may help states and central ministries to execute the measures on priority.

Listing coal-based power plants, brick kilns, vehicles (especially diesel), cooking and heating fires which burn biomass, waste burning, stubble burning and dust from construction, roads and fallow fields as "major sources of air pollution", the Aayog noted that the problem is not limited to Delhi and wanted the government to take "corrective action" and strictly enforce various bans and traffic laws across the country.

"This (air pollution) is most publicised in Delhi, but it is also widespread in many other cities," the Aayog said in its action agenda for 2017-20 while suggesting the measures which are required to be taken by the government.

The Aayog expressed its confidence that "air pollution can be considerably reduced within three years" through actions on the

ground. Suggesting higher taxes on petrol\diesel in and around polluted cities, the Aayog said the measure would encourage people to share cars and use public transport in bigger numbers. It noted, the higher parking fees will have similar effect.

As far as stubble burning is concerned, the think-tank in its action agenda, released last week, said that the crop residue burning is a "very large contributor" to air pollution in early winter in north India. Since productivity of wheat crop depends on early planting after rice is harvested, farmers burn residue in order to prepare the field quickly despite resulting pollution — as seen across farms in Punjab, Haryana and western UP.

The Aayog suggested use of 'Happy Seeder' — a machine developed by the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation, Australia and Punjab Agricultural University — which allows planting of wheat through the residue. "In view of urgency of the problem and the large benefit from putting an end to crop residue burning, a larger subsidy on the machine for limited time may eliminate the problem within the next three years," said the Aayog.

In a section which elaborated on measures to deal with vehicular pollution in the cities, the think-tank also suggested a shift to electric vehicles in the long run, saying the move may become feasible as the cost of the electric battery is predicted to come down in the next decade.

The Aayog has also suggested regulation of polluting industries and disposal of solid waste and pitched for legislative route so that pollution control boards (PCBs) are empowered to "levy graduated fines" depending on the seriousness of the offence and on repeated offence.