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**[AIPSN Statement on recently announced Mission on Oil Palm](#)**

**“No to Oil Palm plantations in India’s Bio-diversity hotspots”**

The [Union Government recently approved](#) a new and poorly conceived National Mission on Edible Oils-Oil Palm (NMEO-OP) with an ecologically damaging focus on large-scale cultivation of Oil Palm in the North-East and the Andaman Islands purportedly due to favorable rainfall and temperature conditions here. It is proposed to raise additional area under Oil Palm plantation to reach around 1 million ha by 2025-26, with production of Crude Palm Oil (CPO) of around 2.8 m Tonnes by 2029-30, aiming to reduce edible oil imports and boost domestic production.

However, the Mission’s thrust on the ecologically fragile bio-diversity hotspots of the NE and the A&N Islands is highly problematic. Oil Palm plantations, especially in the world’s major producing areas of Indonesia and Malaysia involving massive deforestation, [have been observed](#) be a major driver of biodiversity loss. Deforestation including clearing of grasslands would certainly be involved in the Andamans, as indeed [happened in the mid-1970s](#) during earlier such plantation there which Forest authorities objected to. The Andamans also saw displacement of many Jarawa and Onge extremely vulnerable indigenous tribes. Due to these adverse impacts, the Supreme Court in 2002 [imposed a ban on commercial and monoculture plantations](#), and introduction of exotic species, in the A&N Islands.

Niti Aayog and the Union Government have been pushing hard to overcome this SC stay. But Indian Council of Forestry Research and Education (ICFRE) [recommended, in a January 2020 report](#), that introduction of Oil Palm should be avoided in biodiversity rich areas, including grasslands, without detailed studies on its ecological impact. Instead, the Union Government called for submission to the SC of a joint report by ICFRE and the more favorable ICAR Institute of Oil Palm Research (ICAR-IIOPR). Again, in its affidavit to the SC in August 2020 accompanying the confidential report, ICFRE underscored the absence of relevant data, and reiterated its call for comprehensive studies on the ecological impact in the A&N.

The Union Government’s decision to launch NMEO-OP Mission has therefore clearly been taken in the face of staunch and repeated opposition by ICFRE, brushes aside the call for prior studies, and appears to be a political decision, rather than one guided by evidence and expert opinion.

In the NE, [while government spokespersons claim](#) that plantations will only be agricultural lands, past experience shows that shortage of cultivable land, and tribal rather than personal ownership of forest lands in the NE, would inevitably lead to deforestation or conversion of forest fringe areas. Further, Oil Palm plantations in so-called degraded and waste lands near forests also tend to drive encroachment of forests and subsequent deforestation [as witnessed earlier in India](#).

Currently, Mission schemes favor large farmers and corporate leases of community land or other commons due to long gestation periods and high water demand, potentially straining groundwater resources. [Many experts have therefore suggested](#) that, even elsewhere in India, promotion of Oil Palm among small farmers with appropriate support would yield more equitable socio-economic benefits and increased sustainability. [Others have suggested](#) that, if similar subsidies as provided in the Mission are extended to conventional oilseed cultivators, their productivity too could be boosted substantially [as evidenced in earlier Oilseed Missions](#). Even [industry leaders have said](#) that the Mission goals could be met by focusing on groundnut, soyabean and mustard along with Oil Palm.

[In sum](#), programmes for expansion of Oil Palm plantation in India require a research- and evidence-based, locale-specific and multi-dimensional plan to expand Oil Palm acreage wherever economically feasible and ecologically suitable. Oil Palm cultivation in the most ecologically vulnerable A&N Islands, in violation of earlier Supreme Court directions and without rigorous studies, should be ruled out. Mission activities in the biodiversity rich and ecologically sensitive NE should proceed only in limited areas with great caution and based on prior studies. NMEO-OP needs to be thoroughly re-cast in conjunction with efforts to boost productivity of other oilseeds in different parts of India.

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