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Water harvest: Punjab's experiment with DBT for power to the farm sector could pay off for groundwater in the state

By: The Financial Express | New Delhi | Published: February 16, 2018 3:39 AM

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Good news! Salary



State government looking at steps to wean Punjab farmers off the cultivation of water-intensive paddy is welcome news. (Express Photo: Praveen Khanna)

Rapidly-depleting groundwater in nearly a third of the blocks that were assessed by the Central Water Board (CWGB) has caused, The Times of India reports, the Centre to push the scheme on a fast-track. The scheme, part-funded by the World Bank, aims at pushing recharge structures for groundwater use at the local level. The CWGB assessment shows that groundwater in 1,034 blocks is, more water was being drawn out annually than was being recharged—and a further 934 suffered from different

stages of groundwater depletion. The states that were the worst affected were Punjab, Haryana, Rajasthan and Delhi—though Tamil Nadu had the most number of over-exploited blocks. Punjab was the worst in percentage terms with

looking at steps to wean Punjab farmers off the cultivation of water-intensive paddy is welcome news.

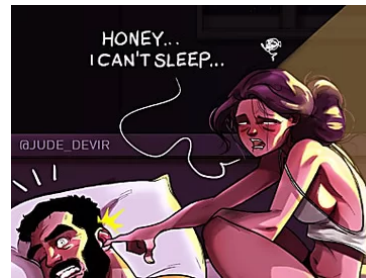
Successive Punjab governments initially nudged the state's farmers into increasing paddy acreage by providing nearly-free electricity for pumping out groundwater and backing intensive MSP-driven procurement of paddy harvest. For a couple of decades now, the state has been trying to wean the farmers away from the crop, but acreage has only gone up—from 11.83 lakh hectares (lh) in 1980-81 to 30.46 lh in 2016-17. Thanks to populist power supply and tariffs, electric tube-well pump-sets in the state rose from 28,000 to 13.5 lakh in the period. Now, the state government has launched a pilot in three villages under which digital meters will be installed on tubewells belonging to nearly 1,000 farmers in the three villages. Instead of compensating the state discom for free power supply, the state will deposit ₹48,000 in the accounts of the farmers who will then be billed by the discom on the basis of actual consumption. The state has entered into an agreement with the J-PAL, which, along with experts from the World Bank, Punjab Agricultural University and various state departments, will estimate the actual power use by farmers and how it might change following the direct benefits transfer (DBT). If the actual costs for farmers are found to be significantly higher than possible that they might rethink their paddy preference.

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