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India plans one million hectares of oil palm

India, one of the world's biggest importers of palm oil, plans to cut import dependence by developing its own oil palm plantation.

Although the newly announced National Mission on Palm Oil raises fears of large-scale deforestation and ecological damages, the government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi appears set to move ahead.

The plan targets to develop one million hectares of land in the north-east region and the Andaman and Nicobar Islands by 2025. US\$1.5 billion has been set aside for this plan. The country has about 370,000 hectares of oil palm at present.

By 2025–26, India's crude oil production is expected to reach

1.12 million tons, rising to 2.8 million tons by 2029–30.

India imported 7,015,400* million metric tons of palm oil in 2020 from the two major producing countries – Indonesia and Malaysia.

"Due to the heavy dependence on imports for edible oils, it is important to make efforts for increasing the domestic production of edible oils," said a government spokesman.

According to the Solvent Extractors Association of India, the country spends an average of US\$10 billion on importing palm oil. This is processed into cooking oil and used in processed food and cosmetic industries.


The Indian Institute of Oil Palm Research has assessed that the

country has 2.8 million hectares of land that could potentially be used for oil palm cultivation.

"The decision of the government is nothing new but a continuation of the previous government policies to reduce dependency from import of edible oil," says Siraj Hussain, India's former secretary of Agriculture and Farmers' Welfare.

He told SciDev.Net that when he was in office, he pushed for oil palm plantation as it "yields about five times more oil than other edible oils per hectare of cultivated area."

India's oil palm drive is not welcomed by some local politicians and environmental groups who fear large-scale deforestation, disturbances to sensitive ecosystems and trigger



land conflicts in tribal areas – the same phenomena seen in Malaysia and Indonesia.

Agatha Sangma, a member of parliament from Meghalaya state in the north-east, tells SciDev.Net that she has written to the government to oppose the move. She feared damage to the environment and the ecology as happened to major oil palm growing countries where millions of hectares of forest were alleged to have been cleared to make way for oil palm.

According to the World Wildlife Fund, oil palm plantations are spreading across Asia, Africa and Latin America at the "expense of tropical forests—which form critical habitats for many endangered species and a lifeline for some human communities."

India's Advances in Agronomy says that the conversion of forest land into oil palm plantations reduces water infiltration and dry season water flows, and increase soil erosion, sedimentation and surface runoff. Another study shows that bird populations declined when natural forests were replaced by oil palm plantations in Mizoram in northeast India.

"It is time to promote traditional oil seed varieties like coconut rather than industrial-scale production of oil with exotic species," says Kartini Samon, an Indonesia-based activist who works with GRAIN, an international non-profit that supports small-scale farmers and community-based biodiversity conservation.