

Information on wheels

Mobile agri clinic van reaches farmers doorstep

By Upasana Upadhyaya

“Information is power” is a true adage. India’s agriculture sector faces many problems, mostly because farmers lack basic knowledge and information regarding most agricultural practices. In order to provide a holistic solution to help farmers identify and utilize sustainable agriculture practices to meet the growing demand for food, a mobile agri clinic van is serving as an information lifeline. This information center on wheels with a fully equipped digital library comes with audio-visual interface, a soil test facility, and an agricultural expert on board. The agri clinic van covers one village in a span of two days, stopping at hamlets and neighborhoods to share much-needed information regarding various crop practices, fertilizers to use, information on government schemes, disease identification and control, and assistance in solving farmer problems.



The agri clinic van was launched in September 2017 and has so far provided services to 6,444 farmers across thirty-eight villages including information about different government programs, soil testing, and adaptive technologies available in agriculture. A toll-free number allows farmers to obtain information and share their queries related to government programs and procedures for availing them. The digital library also has pictures available to share information in an easy-to-understand manner. For example, if a

farmer has queries related to his crop being destroyed by insects or disease and is not able to describe it correctly, the pictures in the digital library make it easier for the farmer and the expert to identify the problem and suggest solutions.

Ram Narayan Singh, Morsand village, Samastipur district, Bihar, says, “Through a community meeting, I learned that an agri van under *Kaushal Krishak* (skilled farmer) project implemented by Sehgal Foundation & Pi Foundation would come to our village to address our queries in agriculture,

government schemes, etc. I learned that, along with the agri clinic van's valuable information on agriculture, crop demonstration, soil testing, etc., the foundation also provides demonstrations on zero tillage. So I decided to give it a try. Though I had seen zero tillage at Borlaug Institute for South Asia, Samastipur, I was hesitant to enquire more about the machine there. By using zero tillage for wheat cultivation, my input costs have come down."



Zero or minimum tillage operation requires less fertilizer and fewer seeds unlike broadcasting (rotavator). The land preparation with rotavator in the traditional method of sowing costs around 150 rupees per acre; but with zero-till farming, each acre requires only 50 rupees for sowing. Zero till requires fewer passes over the field thereby saving fuel and other costs. Less water is also required, which indirectly saves irrigation cost. However, because of the drought this

year in kharif season, more water was required. Taking all these factors into consideration, Ram managed to save Rs 1,300/1,400 rupees per bigha (20 kattha equals 1 bigha). He used to apply 4 kg DAP fertilizer, but with zero-till farming and using soil-testing results, only 2½ kg were required, directly lowering expenses on fertilizers (as per acre¹, fertilizer amounts to 100 rupees).

Soil-testing results served as reference points for Ram. "Normally 60 rupees is charged per soil test and, by the time reports are provided, a season is almost over. But under the *Kaushal Krishak* project, I received free seeds as a crop demonstration for paddy cultivation, and the expenses for cultivation were also covered." He further adds that, with the money saved, he has managed to admit his children to a better private school at Samastipur.



Another farmer, *Anil Kumar Jha*, Gopalpur village, Samastipur, also appreciates the advantages and benefits of the mobile agri clinic van. He had his soil tested through the van for free and was happy to receive the reports in time. He learned about the balanced amount of nutrients to be applied and was informed about Sehgal Foundation's JalKalp water filter, which led to his family's decision to have it installed at home.

¹ In Bihar, 22 kattha is measured as one acre.

The agri clinic van comes at regular intervals and benefits farmers in different ways. The toll-free helpline number (18001238550) has seen many callers from the community. Sehgal Foundation's Good Rural Governance team, which manages the helpline, receives regular calls from the community panchayats for information on services related to agriculture, government schemes, etc. Even school students from government secondary school, Kalaunjar, Samastipur, called asking for information about a government scheme as recommended by a teacher. "I managed to access the *Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana* scheme bribe-free from the information obtained through toll-free number," says *Mohammad Muktar Ahmed* from Harpur Ailoth village, Samastipur.

Sometimes calls are missed or information cannot be provided instantly, but the numbers are always called back so that answers and help are provided in any way possible. Regardless of any glitches, stories from the field and the numbers registered with the van clinic show a steady response and how the community as a whole benefits from the mobile agri clinic.

(Upasana Upadhyaya is working with Sehgal Foundation as an Ideosync UNESCO Information Fellow)