

# OIL PALM IN NORTH-EAST INDIA

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North- East is a big ticket for bringing sizeable area under Oil Palm. Around 32% of total potential area in India (9 lakh Ha. in North-East, out of 28 lakh Hectare total potential area identified in India) is available and suitable in North-East (N-E) for oil palm cultivation, without touching Forest Cover. Loss of Forest cover in the entire N-E region is significant and rampant due to shifting (Jhum) cultivation. Until & unless the Jhumias are offered some alternative livelihood, jhum cultivation cannot be eradicated. Rehabilitation of tribal families once made through establishment of oil palm plantation with the help of Jhumias successfully, we will be able to reduce destruction forest cover over a period of time. OP cultivation in N-E will improve Socio-economic condition of local people without disturbing environment.

Ministry of Agriculture & Farmers Welfare ( MoA & FW), Government of India ( G.O.I) launched a mission on 18th August 2021 in the name of” National Mission on Edible Oils – Oil Palm ( NMEO-OP)” to promote oil palm ( OP) cultivation extensively in India , with a special focus in N-E. The industry has welcomed the decision. However, significant progress towards bringing sizeable area in N-E under cultivation since the launch of the said mission is yet to see, mainly because of the following factors:

1. Allotment of districts to various companies by the respective state- completed a couple of months ago.
2. Nursery growing period ( including lead time for major import of oil palm sprouts / germinated seeds by new companies from Ivory coast , Malaysia, Costa Rica , Thailand etc. etc. )- is around 18-24 months prior to supply of seedlings to farmers.
3. Response from local farmers initially always become slow, as they follow the Principle of “Wait & watch” & “seeing is believing”.

Post launch of NMEO-OP, Green activists have started negative campaign regarding ecological imbalances due to introduction of monoculture and water intensive crop like oil palm at the cost of destruction of Forest cover in the entire N-E region. They are citing the example of SE Asian and African countries & few sporadic incidences locally – where oil palm is grown in forest area, though it has no basic & true information.

### Suggestions:

The oil palm industry (mainly companies) should start and continue their focus in N-E states by ensuring:

1. There is no encroachment in Forest area/ protected areas/ land classified as to be conserved.
2. Farmers know and respect the boundaries of High Carbon Stocks (HCS) & High Conservation Values (HCV) areas for conservation and the risk of land conversion for oil palm planting is extremely minimal.

3. A true narrative and success story of oil palm ( as evidenced in Andhra Pradesh & Telangana)- need be projected aggressively and jointly by both State Department of Agriculture / Horticulture and respective companies, like :
  - a) Oil Palm is no more a monoculture as per the report of IOPR (Indian Institute of Oil Palm Research, Govt. of India), since lot of less water intensive intercrops like pepper, ginger, turmeric, cocoa etc. are grown under partial shade condition in existing plantation.
  - b) Crop per drop concept through micro irrigation in oil palm field already established and it ensures judicious use of water. This is specially required during short dry spell in N-E for hardly four months.

Total water requirement in oil palm field is less than that of Rice, sugarcane & Banana

Crop	Water ( lakh Litres/Ha./year) Requirement
Oil Palm	67.35
Banana	120.00
Sugarcane	133.00
Rice*	300.00

\*for two crop seasons in a year

Ref. BN Rao Et al. (2016) Technical Bulletin – Irrigation Management in Oil Palm, IOPR- Pedavegi – 534450.

4. Training and capacity building by the extension team (headed by experienced person/s in oil palm activities over the decades) of all companies remain a top priority in order to communicate correct and authenticated information down the line across the N-E States.
5. Selection of farmers (having required resources for oil palm) is a key to success and bringing Effective Area under Cluster approach is very critical in nature and is the only Mantra to make the programme successful. Oil Palm companies should not be keen to sell saplings to any one they can, otherwise it will turn to be a huge disaster for all stake holders. I would encourage industry not to repeat the mistakes of the past.
6. To realize North East’s Oil Palm potential, we must have a long term focus with strong commitment spanning 12-15 years. Challenge the challenges like poor infrastructure and poor link road connectivity across most of the rural areas in N-E States- both by G.O.I. & respective concerned State Department (other than Agriculture/ Horticulture) jointly undertake certain series of measures towards removal of such bottlenecks associated in oil palm development in a phased manner.

Keeping in mind the Past Experience & evidences (though past is not the extension cord of future) and considering above facts & situations in N-E, I believe that 2.5-3.0 lakh Ha. area can be developed in entire N-E States in next 7-8 years’ time ( by 2030-31) by all companies together. Finally, there is a need to form a “Core Committee” – consist of few oil palm Experts/ Professionals, Scientists and representative from company/ies and State department – who will review the progress critically on half yearly basis by visiting the sites physically on random basis (without any biasness) and submit the report to G.O.I & State for necessary course correction/ additional steps to be taken to improve the situation as & when required.

\* Views expressed are personal