Gairaha is not a place that usually attracts media attention. But something unusual was under way as the new year entered its second week. On January 8, the village in Bangra in Uttar Pradesh's Jhansi district saw more than 10,000 farmers protesting at the local intermediate college. Incensed over the shortage of urea fertiliser, and anticipating another bad production year after suffering heavy losses of rabi crops for two consecutive years, they threatened to start a long drawn campaign.

It was not an isolated incident. For farmers in Bihar, UP, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and other wheat-growing regions, this winter is like the last few winters-the chill getting frostier inthe face of a shortage of urea, the nitrogen-rich fertiliser that means make or break for the rabi crop for most modest farmers. Like the last few years, the season has thus far meant farmers waiting at government-run fertiliser distribution outlets for hours-sometimes from midnight to dawn-and often being told no urea would be distributed that day.

Returning home from Gairaha Inter College that day, a miffed Shiv Narayan Singh Parihaar, the president of the Bhartiya Kisan Union in Bundelkhand, says there are scores of voices to save religion, water, power and the like, but not many to look after the fate of farmers in India. "If urea supply does not improve soon, farmers will be finished. Or they will lose patience," he adds, indicating trouble in store for the local administration unless authorities act soon.

So, what would the implications be? Although the United Nations's Food and Agriculture Organization estimated the value of fertiliser applied at below 10 per cent of the gross value of crop produced in a 2011 paper, experts say any unusual rise in urea prices would affect production, and thereby prices of farm produce. That would mean a bigger hole in the wallet.

The problem is simple enough-a yawning demand-supply gap-and the solution is just that arduous to figure out. And unless something sweepingly drastic takes place, there isn't any in the foreseeable future. Union Minister of Chemicals and Fertilisers, [Ananth Kumar](http://indiatoday.intoday.in/people/ananth-kumar/19444.html), spread out the whole nine yards of the problem: "The country demands 3.05 crore tonnes of urea annually. Our average annual domestic production is 2.26 crore tonnes. The remaining 80 lakh tonnes or so is met through import."

But even import of urea, the government's own data reveals, has gone down of late-by as much as 34 per cent on a year-on-year basis in April-October 2014. Making it a double whammy for farmers, four big fertiliser manufacturing units stopped operations in 2014, curtailing output further. Since 1990, as many as 13 units have either shut down or ceased operation.

What makes urea a life saver for Indian farmers is its extremely low price, as it is regulated by the government. The maximum retail price of a tonne of urea is Rs.5,360. In contrast, the MRP of ammonium phosphate sulphate 20:20:0:13 was Rs.23,124 per tonne and that of nitrogen phosphate potash 10:26:26:0 Rs.22,780, according to the Department of Fertilisers' October 2014 bulletin. This price difference also means a large part of the domestically produced urea is smuggled out to neighbouring countries, where it costs much more. With 75 per cent of the fertiliser subsidy going towards keeping urea prices below-par, rates of urea have remained static for the last 12 years. "The subsidy on DAP (diammonium phosphate) and some other fertilisers is comparatively less, and thus farmers are not interested in them," says Satish Chandra, director general, Fertiliser Association of India.

Overuse of urea has also meant an adverse effect on soil. "Our larger concern is to sustain productive capacity and retain land nutrients. Thus, organic and chemical fertilisers should be used in a balanced way," says U.S. Awasthi, CEO and managing director of IFFCO, India's biggest fertiliser manufacturing cooperative society. Removing the subsidy, though, is a political hot potato. Both the previous UPA government and the present NDA regime have shied away, after initially declaring a cut.

While some experts and officials are seeking price deregulation for urea, Chandra says the government should pay the subsidy directly to the farmer-making a farmer buy urea at market price and transferring the subsidy amount subsequently to his/her Aadhaar-linked bank account. This initiative, says Chandra, would help curb the black market and urea smugglers.

Talking about an immediate solution, Madhya Pradesh Chief Minister [Shivraj Singh Chouhan](http://indiatoday.intoday.in/people/shivraj-singh-chouhan/17958.html) told India Today, "I met Union minister Ananth Kumar and asked him to allot 134 (railway) rakes of urea over the quota of 120 rakes." Besides, cooperative societies are now selling more urea, he said.

Kumar says the issue is getting attention even from [Narendra Modi](http://indiatoday.intoday.in/people/narendra-modi/17737.html), who had discussed it with him soon after taking over as prime minister. "The most important point of his guidelines was to achieve self-sufficiency. We will revive the closed plants. For this we need pipeline grids, and [Arun Jaitley](http://indiatoday.intoday.in/people/arun-jaitley/19435.html) has provided Rs.10,000 crore for laying gas pipelines." India, Kumar stresses, will attain self-sufficiency in the next five-six years and become a fertiliser exporter over the next 10 years. He says a shortfall of two lakh tonne would be met through neem-coated urea, which was launched recently, while two lakh tonne would be got by enhancing capacity of existing plants. Another six lakh tonne would be provided by reviving the five plants that shut down in the last few years-in Gorakhpur (Uttar Pradesh), Sindhri (Jharkhand), Barauni (Bihar), Talchar (Odisha) and Ramanujam (Tamil Nadu).

But for Gairaha's farmers, that is too far in the future. For the Modi government, which has so far been in the news over big-ticket reforms, the clock is ticking away.
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