

# Even wastelands can be cultivated 'power'fully

Mohamed Imranullah S.

**MADURAI:** Farmers whose lands have become uncultivable due to poor soil conditions and increased groundwater alkalinity need not convert them into house sites. They can make money by utilising their lands to grow Napier grass, used as fuel in biomass-based power projects, according to N.P. Singh, advisor, Union Ministry of New and Renewable Energy.

Speaking to *The Hindu* on the sidelines of a meeting of the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Energy here on Monday, he said T. Rajasekaran, a 59-year-old farmer of Kannivadi town panchayat in Dindigul district, had already made handsome profits by cultivating Napier grass on his wasteland.

"It not only helps the farmer monetarily but also benefits the country by augmenting power generation through a renewable source. We have already achieved generation of 30,000 MW of electricity through solar, wind, biomass and small hydro power projects that generate up to 25 MW. We have plans to increase this to 55,000 MW by March 2017," he noted.

When contacted over



*A farm in Kannivadi town panchayat.*

phone, Mr. Rajasekaran said he could not cultivate cotton, maize or tomato on his land as the groundwater alkalinity was found to be over 8 pH. "Initially, I was apprehensive when a private renewable energy power producer approached me with the proposal to grow Napier grass. However, I planted it on 3.7 acres. And the risk paid off," he said.

He spent Rs.62,000 to prepare his land for cultivation of the grass. After six months, the harvest reaped him Rs.1.18 lakh. "Thereafter, I spent just Rs.15,000 and the grass is now ready for the second harvest. Only the initial cost of preparing the land is a little high. Thereafter, I can keep mak-

ing money every six months for around seven to eight years," he added.

Mr. Singh said, "Private biomass-based power companies purchased coconut leaves for Rs.3,500 per tonne. But signing agreements with farmers for Napier grass cultivation costs them only around Rs.1,800 a tonne," he pointed out.

J. Sivarani, deputy general manager (plantation) of privately-owned Orient Green Power Company, said as per a business model developed by her company, the farmers would be provided with fertilizers. They would also be freed from the hassle of harvesting as well as transporting the harvested grass.