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BIOCHAR: a profitable solution to Thailand's HAZE PROBLEM

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SPECIAL TO THE NATION

We who live in North Thailand appreciate the detailed coverage of the haze problem and its causes offered in articles such as "Giving voice to the forests" (*The Nation*, March 5). I would, however, like to make several points regarding long-term solutions to the problem.

The problem is not, as your article suggests, the result of "irresponsible agricultural practices in the highlands". It is the result of poor farmers burning fields of corn stalk to be able to plant a new crop quickly. They do this because they have no alternatives. Corn is the only cash crop they have. The current boom in contract corn farming has been a boon to them, providing the first steady income in memory. The problem is the stalk, which weighs the equivalent of one half of their corn kernel.

Switching crops

Is there a way to escape the public health consequences of this necessity? The suggestion offered in your article – encouraging farmers to switch to other crops – can work. Research at Mae Fah Luang University shows that the only places where regular hot spots disappear from satellite imagery are where farmers have adopted alternative crops.

There are several problems with this solution, not least that Thailand needs the corn. From an implementation point of view, this solution is costly and likely to have limited impact even where it does not run into legal barriers. (These often stop efforts to develop coffee, for example.) Professor Somkiat Chaipiboon reports that, in Mae Chaem, just three villages have been set up as models of alternative crop production. Other villages have not followed their example. Why? Projects that require large outside expenditures almost

always fail when the money runs out. Even more important, as Professor Poon Theinburanamthum points out, nowhere is anyone offering a "marketing strategy" for alternative crops to replace the highly developed and efficient system that serves the corn market from mountain village to chicken barn.

Poor farmers will change crops only when they can see a secure market for a new crop. No such low-cost, easily accessed farm-to-market system exists in Mae Chaem for anything but corn. Until it does, corn will be the crop of choice.

Can you do anything with corn? Yes, and this ought to be our focus. Why spend lots of money to change what farmers are doing now? Farmers are growing corn. The contract system works. Why not develop a solution to the haze problem