

Activists seek more time for feedback on forest act changes

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CHENNAI: The deadline for feedback on the Centre's proposed amendments to the Forest Conservation Act, 1980, expires on May 18 and environmental activists are a worried lot.

They fear changes involving language limitations, commercial interests, and exemptions for strategic projects risk setting back conservation efforts. They have demanded publication of the amendment bill in 22 languages listed in the Constitution and more time to submit feedback after that. Activists claim that since 2014, about 1.4 lakh hectares of forests have been lost to projects.

The Forest Conservation Act, 1980, was enacted to prevent excessive or unnecessary deforestation during non-forest projects such as construction of highways, tunnels, dams in areas falling under the definition of forest. Under strategic and security projects of national importance, construction of various ports under the Sagarmala project, construction of highways under the Bharatmala Paryojana project, and the neutrino laboratory in Theni district had been planned. "Implementation of projects in the name of national importance will lead to massive destruction of forests," said Sundarrajan G, coordinator of Poovulagin Nanbargal, an environmental movement.

Prabhakaran Veeraarasu, environmental engineer, Poovulagin Nanbargal, told TOI that amendment bill also contained clauses that may affect the livelihood and rights of tribals and other communities living in and adjacent to forests. He said the proposed amendments to the forest act should be published in all the 22 languages mentioned in the Constitution as was done for the Environment Impact Assessment Notification 2020. This too was originally brought out only in English and Hindi, but was later brought out in other Indian languages following a court order.