

CAG finds diversion of 7,785 ha of forest land

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The state Forest, Ecology & Environment Department violated the Forest Conservation Act while approving or leasing 7,785 hectares (19,237 acres) of forest land, a Comptroller and Auditor General of India (CAG) report has found. It highlighted the failure of the department in ensuring compensatory afforestation in exchange for forest land diverted to other purposes between 2013 and 2018, even after collecting statutory charges for the same.

The CAG audit between January and July 2018 covered two offices of Additional Principal Chief Conservator of Forests and 10 out of 39 territorial divisions in Karnataka. The report was tabled in the Assembly recently.

During the period, 105 cases of diversions in exchange for compensatory afforestation, totalling 817.83 ha, were approved by the department.

After the diversions, 911.13 hectares were to be afforested as stipulated by the Ministry of Environment and Forest (MoEF). However, only 449.57 hectares were afforested, resulting in a shortfall of 50.65%.

Recommending “closer attention and suitable corrective actions from the department” to rectify the shortcomings, the CAG report said the failure to take up afforestation even after collecting statutory charges for the purpose of raising plantations defeated the objective of compensatory afforestation.

It also noted that though only lands suitable for afforestation should be accepted by the department as compensation for diverted forestland, “997.28 hectares of unsuitable land were accepted” due to which compensatory afforestation wasn’t possible.

“The probability of more number of unauthorised diversions in the remaining 29 out of 39 divisions cannot be ruled out, which is indicative of the fact that the actual CA shortfall of 51% in the state is not a true depiction,” the CAG report noted.

The report also mentioned the usage of forest land for non-forest purposes without prior approval. A scrutiny of records revealed that 320.88 hectares of forestland in 15 cases were being used for non-forest purposes without approval from the Government of India, and the period of unauthorised occupancy ranged from four to 25 years. Similarly, leases were not renewed for use of 475.77 hectares of forest land, 4,443 hectares of rubber plantations and 2,500 hectares of cashew plantation.

Among other violations observed in the audit were activities taken up by department agencies inside forests without approval, incorrect approval of forest land, declaring land received in lieu of diverted forestland as reserve forest or protected forest, etc. “Our test-check of records showed deficiencies in the areas of approval or renewal of lease for diversion of forestland (7,785.07 hectares) in contravention of the provisions of the Forest Conservation Act,” it said.

Source: <https://www.deccanherald.com/state/top-karnataka-stories/cag-finds-diversion-of-7785-ha-of-forest-land-768184.html>