

Centre gives Rs. 47,436 crore to states for afforestation

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The Union environment ministry on Thursday released Rs 47,436 crore to 27 states for compensatory afforestation and other forest conservation work.

Prakash Javadekar, the environment, forests and climate change minister, handed over cheques to state forest ministers in a meeting from a total corpus of Rs 54,685 crore collected under the ad hoc Compensatory Afforestation Fund Management and Planning Authority (CAMPA).

Compensatory afforestation means that every time forest land is diverted for non-forest purposes such as mining or industry, the user agency pays for planting forests over an equal area of non-forest land, or when such land is not available, on twice the area of degraded forest land. This money is collected under the compensatory afforestation fund.

Odisha will receive the largest share of Rs 5,933.98 crore, followed by Chhattisgarh with Rs 5791.70 crore, and Madhya Pradesh with Rs 5196.69 crore, an environment ministry statement said.

According to the statement, state governments are expected to utilize the funds for regeneration of forests, raising plantations, wildlife management, voluntary relocation of villages from protected areas and supply of wood-saving cooking appliances in forest fringe villages, among other things.

The funds cannot be utilized for paying forest staff salaries or travelling allowances, purchasing vehicles, funding foreign visits, construction of office buildings, purchase of furniture or appliances like air conditioners as specified in the Compensatory Afforestation Funds Rules, 2018, the statement added.

Fund utilization will be monitored through various technologies including geo-tagging, Javadekar said at the meeting.

The CAMPA funds, being transferred in addition to the state budget for forests, have to be utilized by states to achieve India's nationally determined contribution (NDC) -- under the 2015 Paris Agreement on climate change -- of creating an additional carbon sink of 2.5 to 3 billion tonnes of carbon dioxide by 2030, the statement added. Over Rs 5,000 crore will be allotted to conservation work taken up by the Centre, which will include developing research infrastructure and catchment area treatment.

On January 28, the Supreme Court directed that all funds under CAMPA be transferred to a new authority created by the Centre for utilisation by states.

In many states, forest dwelling communities have protested that afforestation activities have been taken up without consulting them. In Odisha for example, native forests have been cleared without consent of forest dwellers to make way for plantations.

A major concern raised by environmental and forest rights activists about the compensatory afforestation fund rules is that they state that the afforestation working plan will be taken up "in consultation" with the "gram sabha or village forest management committee."

This means that gram sabha consent can be bypassed as its role is interchangeable with that of a village forest committee, which is constituted for joint management of forests by the forest department and local communities.

The Union tribal affairs ministry highlighted in its comments to the draft rules that "reference to van sanrakshan samiti or village forest committee is not only extra constitutional but also not desirable when under the Forest Rights Act 2006, only the gram sabha is statutorily recognized".

According to Kanchi Kohli, legal researcher at Centre for Policy Research, "The release of CAF [compensatory afforestation funds] money has little ecological consequence or livelihood importance. This is for two reasons: first, the money is collected out of activities which result in loss or degradation of forests. Second, the money is tied to the implementation of state government programs that don't necessarily enhance biodiversity or ensure decentralized forest governance."

The issue of CAMPA funds goes back to 2002 when the Supreme Court ordered that any infrastructure project set up on forestland would have to compensate the loss by paying the net present value (NPV) of the forestland diverted. But money was not released because there was no law or rule in place on how the money should be utilized.

Source: <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/centre-gives-47-436-crore-to-states-for-afforestation/story-SGkiyCjKtnkg0fIT6Ktl5K.html>