

## Deemed forests get a raw deal

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The 20-year delay by the state government in identifying deemed forests has resulted in the exploitation of such land for commercial activities, including quarrying.

At a time when forests and forest lands in the state are withering under "development" and encroachment, the Karnataka government has dropped 1.62 lakh hectares of land from the deemed forest category, citing less number of trees than the stipulated figure.

The extent of land identified to be categorised as deemed forests is steadily declining ever since the state government undertook the exercise of consolidating additional areas to boost forest conservation, following a Supreme Court order in 1995.

Nearly 10 lakh hectares of land was identified as deemed forest by the reconstituted expert panel, which placed the affidavit before the apex court in 2002.

However, the state government decided to review the area time and again. In the latest affidavit filed before the court recently, the extent of such land has been reduced to 3.30 lakh hectares.

The affidavit also provides 10 reasons for the "drastic fall" in the area, including the wrong classification of private land as government land, inclusion of forest land already notified by the government and repetition of survey numbers among others.

“More than 1.6 lakh hectares of land has been dropped because the number of trees on such parcels did not meet the requirements stipulated by the 2014 government order,” a senior official said.

The order stated that an area of two hectares and above having at least a density of 50 naturally grown trees with 30 cm girth per hectare should be classified as deemed forest land. “The forest department had originally batted for the inclusion of such areas. However, the government insisted on dropping such lands due to pressure from district-level committees,” a senior official said.

Sources in the government added that district committees, headed by deputy commissioners, functioned under pressure from local politicians who did not want the revenue land to be declared as deemed forests.

“There were problems in the beginning itself. Some leaders said it affected the development works they had planned in the districts. In the end, the ‘deemed forest’ land remains open for encroachment,” another official said.

Interestingly, the state government has sanctioned Rs 2 crore to take up afforestation activities in the 3.3 lakh hectares. “It beats logic as to why the same activity could not be extended to the 1.6 lakh hectares which now stands deleted,” the official said.

Source: <https://www.deccanherald.com/state/top-karnataka-stories/deemed-forests-get-a-raw-deal-782356.html>