

# Forest department to mark land for widening Manali highway

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KULLU: The district forest department will measure the land acquired for widening the national highway to Manali and demarcate it with boundary pillars. The divisional forest officer has issued these orders based on complaints received from Bilaspur-based Four-lane Visthapit and Prabahavit Samiti (FVPS), which works for those displaced by the road-widening projects. To differentiate the acquired land from private land, the boundary pillars of reinforced cement concrete (RCC), bearing serial numbers and GPS coordinates, were to be pitched on both sides of the Kiratpur-Manali highway. However, all five sections - Kiratpur-Nerchowk, Nerchowk-Pandoh, Pandoh-Takoli, Takoli-Kullu, and Kullu-Manali - are bare.

FVPS general secretary Madan Sharma said: "The central government had ordered the pillars to be pitched and land to be demarcated before starting to widen the road in 2013. This was to avoid disputes, deviations, and misalignment. The work is about to be over, but the pillars remain to be installed, and now it'll be a tougher task since the land acquisition department has accepted while replying to an RTI query that it doesn't have the original layout to guarantee error-free measurement."

Two years ago on June 23, 2021, the environment ministry had directed the National Highway Authority of India (NHAI) to install these pillars on both sides of the highway. The FVPS has reported deviations and realignments,

besides claiming that these had been made to favour some people, while the NHAI had violated the demarcation rules.

For widening the Kiratpur-Nerchowk stretch, 318.4 hectares was acquired, out of which, 74.7 hectares of forest was diverted to a new purpose and about Rs 2,200 crore given away as compensation to the oustees of the Kiratpur-Chandigarh highway widening project.