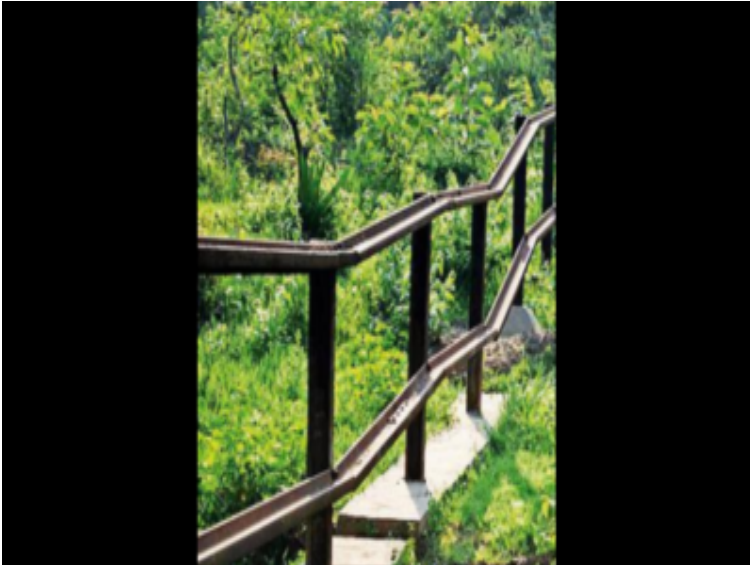


Forest fencing: Keeping people safe is our priority, minister tells Centre

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BENGALURU: The spiralling cost of setting up a rail barricade fence around forest areas to prevent human-elephant conflict seems to have triggered a fresh face-off between the central and state governments.

Shocked over Karnataka's increased expenditure on building a rail barricade fence, the Union ministry of environment, forests and climate change (MoEF&CC) is said to have asked the state government why it is spending so much. However, the forest minister has responded that "safeguarding human life is our priority".

At present, the state is building rail barricade fencing around forests at a cost of Rs 1.5 crore per kilometre. Noting the spiralling

costs, the ministry recently asked forest minister Eshwar Khandre about the increased expenditure. "The Centre is worried about the rising expenditure on building this barricade and the issue came up for discussion when I recently met Union minister Bhupender Yadav. Perhaps he must have been misinformed about our priorities. In fact, when he asked me why are we spending so much on this barricade method, I replied to him that human lives are important and no amount of compensation can bring back people. If we are successful in preventing jumbos from coming out of forests, we can safeguard hundreds of human lives," Khandre said.

Many lives lost

In 2022-23 alone, Karnataka lost 51 people to wildlife attacks, including 29 who were killed by elephants. "We've planned to set up rail barricade fencing of 641km. So far, we've completed about 310km. We've sought additional allocation of funds in the upcoming budget to complete the remaining work. We intend to complete the pending work within three years," the minister clarified. The state government had planned to make use of funds under the Compensatory Afforestation Fund Management and Planning Authority for completion of the fencing project and recently requested the MoEF&CC to release Rs 222 crore out of the Rs 362-crore proposal that was submitted to the Centre by the Karnataka government.

In fact, when two farmers were trampled to death by a tusker in Ramanagara a fortnight ago, Bengaluru Rural MP DK Suresh had appealed to the minister to pursue building rubble-stone walls around forests along with solar fencing. Following Suresh's appeal, the minister directed officials to submit a comparative report on the costs involved in building solar fencing and rail fencing. "While it costs Rs 1.5 crore to build 1km of rail barricade, it costs about Rs 6 lakh for setting up 1km of solar fence," a senior official said.