

Haryana wants 'protected forest' tag off land around waterbodies

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Gurgaon: Forests make for just 3.6% of Haryana's total land mass, but that too could slide if the irrigation department's proposal seeking to exempt areas around water bodies from the Forest (Conservation Act) is implemented.

The department sought the exemption from the state government in 2021, arguing that trees on the inner slopes of land near water bodies obstruct the flow of the water and, in some places, the roots damage the water bodies. The water bodies that fall in protected forest areas mostly include canals, river tributaries and stormwater drains.

Department officials said on Monday that the government had agreed to the proposal in principle at a meeting in March 2021, but the forest department was pushing back on the issue. The government has not issued a notification as yet.

"Exempting the land from forest tag will allow the department to expand the area of the water bodies and remove trees which obstruct the water flow which increases during monsoon every year," the proposal read.

Experts said the 'protected forest' label is critical because no non-forestry activity can be carried out without permission from the forest department. Similarly, removing green cover around water bodies in a state that has to persistently deal with the issue of urban flooding would further worsen the situation.

They also pointed out that land notified under FCA — a central law — cannot just be redirected to non-forest activities. The only way to do this is get permission from the state government, and subsequently the Union environment ministry, apart from carrying out mandatory compensatory afforestation to make up for any green losses.

But the irrigation department has renewed its thrust to “de-register” the land. Irrigation department’s engineer-in-chief Satbir Singh Kadiyan told TOI: “Haryana CM has already agreed to our proposal, but the forest department is stalling it. We are prepared to arrest forest officers and whoever stalls the canal operations. Instructions to this effect have already been given by me to all divisional canal officers in Haryana.”

When asked, the forest department said that it alone has the mandate for management for areas around water bodies under the Indian Forest Act, 1927.

Since plantation is not possible on slopes, the irrigation department could have just mapped areas such as the inward slopes of canals to carry out its work without harming any trees, according to Compensatory Afforestation Fund Management and Planning Authority (CAMPA) chairman Vivek Saxena.

Saxena added that forest land can’t be de-notified. “Even though plantation work cannot be carried out on slopes of canals, there is no demarcation of such land. The area is considered a protected forest, and it cannot be de-notified,” he said. For instance, the forest department this April slapped a penalty on an agency working for the irrigation department for allegedly chopping down trees near the Lohari minor canal in Jhajjar’s Kulana, notified under FCA.

“If the land around water bodies, canals and roads are exempted from forest category, then Haryana will have less than 0.06% of dense forest as the state already has just 3.6% of its total area as a forest,” said RP Balwan, former forest conservator of Gurgaon.



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