



Lok Sabha passes Bill to let forest land be used for strategic needs

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Diversion of forests for construction of roads, railway lines or other projects of strategic nature near India's international borders would no longer require clearance, if a Bill passed by Lok Sabha on Wednesday becomes law.

The Bill to amend the Forest (Conservation) Act, 1980, passed by Lok Sabha with voice vote, exempts certain kinds of infrastructure or development projects from the need to get forest clearance, which is mandatory at present. These include "strategic linear projects of national importance and concerning national security" situated within 100 km of international borders.

Even non-linear projects involving the creation of "security related infrastructure" would remain exempt, if the area of forest land to be diverted is restricted to 10 hectares.

In Naxal-affected areas, projects involving diversion of up to five hectares of land for "defence related" infrastructure or public utilities would no longer be covered by the provisions of the Forest (Conservation) Act. But all these projects would still have to carry out compensatory afforestation, mandated by another law.

The amendment Bill, in fact, renames the parent legislation, the Forest (Conservation) Act, 1980, to Van (Sanrakshan Evam Samvardhan) Adhiniyam, which translates to Forest (Conservation and Augmentation) Act. Besides being in Hindi, the new name is a reflection of a new focus on afforestation and reforestation activities, with the objective of increasing India's forest cover and fulfilling its international commitment of creating an additional carbon sink of 2.5-3 billion tonnes by 2030.

These objectives have been included in the [preamble](#) to the proposed amended Act. The original Act did not have any preamble.

"The primary objective of this Bill is to increase the forest area of the country to meet our goals of conservation of forests, conservation of biodiversity and the challenges posed by climate change... That is why we have decided to drop the English word 'forest' and replaced it with van sanrakshan aur samvardhan, which is closer to the vocabulary of our people," Environment Minister Bhupender Yadav said in [Lok Sabha](#).

Green cover diversion

About 41 lakh hectares of forest land were cleared for non-forest purposes between 1951 and 1976, govt data says. In the 43 years since the law, about 9.83 lakh hectares were diverted.

A major feature of the Bill is the encouragement provided for private forests and agro-forestry projects. The amendment ensures that private forests and agro-forestry would not be considered forests in the traditional sense, which means these too would be exempt from the provisions of the original Act. That would ensure that farmers or owners of these private forests can harvest their lands, for commercial or

other uses, without the need for acquiring forest clearance. This decision had been under consideration for a long time and could potentially result in a major growth in agro-forestry projects.

By lifting the restrictions on the cultivation of private forests, the government is hoping for a significant increase in forest cover, which will help India in achieving its international commitment and also inch towards the stated objective of putting one-third of its area under forest cover.

The amendment also allows small constructions, up to a maximum area of 0.1 hectares, on forest land situated alongside a railway line or a highway that provides access to a habitation, or to a railway or roadside facility.

The Bill was passed amid din in the House over the Manipur issue, with some Opposition members raising objections to certain provisions. RSP member N K Premachandran even raised a point of order claiming that a “substantive motion” on a policy matter like this could not be brought before the House till the no-confidence motion, served by the Opposition in Lok Sabha on Wednesday, had been disposed of. Rajendra Agrawal, who was in the chair at the time, rejected the contention.

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